



By FangirlingStrangerThings

Part of Your World by FangirlingStrangerThings

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Summary: Eleven is a badass telekinetic, secret Disney lover hiding undercover in Chicago with her fellow Hawkins Lab escapee Kali and their gang of misfits. Mike Wheeler is a clumsy lovable nerd who gets mugged and finds himself being rescued by said badass telekinetic Disney loving girl. He wants to make it through life unscathed and she wants romance. Will they find the answer together?

1. Eleven

Part of Your World

AN: Welcome to my new Mileven fanfic! I know TLYD Missing Moments aren't finished yet, but I've been itching to get this new story started and I really hope you like it :-)

Chapter 1: Eleven

16th January 1992

Mike yawned loudly as he left the Department of Computer Science just before the security guard came to lock up. The moment he began walking down the steps of the building he shuddered in the ice-cold January air. Mike pulled his black coat tighter to his body, hoisted his backpack on and wrapped the scarf his mom had knitted for him close to his neck trying to ease off some of the bitter cold. It was only a fifteen-minute walk to his dorm, an easy twelve minutes if he cut through Plaisance Park.

He began to pick up his pace, his journey illuminated by the orange glow of the many security lights of the college that spread across the small avenues that made up the University of Chicago. Mike squinted at his digital watch in the darkness of the night and groaned when he realised it was almost 11pm.

Classes had finished at 5pm but Mike had eaten quickly and then headed back to the building to use the computer room. Well more specially to finish writing codes for the assignment that was due in tomorrow at 9am.

He would like to blame Dustin for the fact that his assignment wasn't completed until about ten minutes ago. A promise of a Star Wars marathon had been all it had taken to make Mike leave his coding behind in favour of Princess Leia, Han Solo and Luke Skywalker.

Sharing a dorm room with Dustin certainly had its challenges, one of them being his ability to distract Mike which had resulted in him

typing furiously into the night as he quickly tried to get the assignment done and of at least some kind of good quality.

Mike was mostly in his own world as he walked towards the park, only briefly thinking that campus was really quiet that evening. He assumed it was to do with the bitter cold that night.

He shivered and ploughed on, wanting to get back to his room as soon as possible. He wondered if Dustin would be worried or if he would have guessed what Mike had been busy doing.

He was just entering Plaisance Park when he looked at the grass, turned to a stiff sparkling white as he took a moment to appreciate the beauty of winter. The frozen grass made a crunching noise as Mike headed across the park towards home.

He didn't notice the man following him, too absorbed with wondering whether Alien 3 was going to be as freaky as 1 and 2. Mike wasn't the biggest fan of scary movies, but Max, one of his childhood friends insisted he needed to toughen up. According to Max it was one of the reasons he was so hopeless with girls.

He disagreed of course, thinking it was more to do with his general awkwardness and love of anything nerdy that made girls keep a safe distance. Okay he'd kissed like two girls in his whole life, so he wasn't doing too bad!

But Mike was going to turn 21 next month and he'd never...well you know. Dustin had insisted that college was the time to get rid of the v card because everyone was up for experimenting and enjoying their freedom from their parents. But for Mike, he actually wanted it to mean something. Was that so wrong?

Any more complex thoughts in his mind were cut short when he received a heavy shove to the back and his arms flailed trying to catch himself. He fell face forward into the grass with a "umph" escaping his mouth as he cut his chin on a jagged stone.

Suddenly someone was leaning down next to him and Mike gulped, his eyes widening in horror as a pen knife was forced by his throat. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest as he tried to look up

at the culprit from his position on the floor. He could smell alcohol and something else, which he could only assume was some kind of drug by the pungent smell.

"Give me your money or I'll slit your fucking throat," the man said in a slurred and dark voice.

Mike tried not to panic and forced himself to speak. "My...my wallet. I-It's in the backpack. At the front."

The man's hands went to the backpack, Mike could feel it being rummaged in as it dug into his back. He wanted to fight back, wanted to get up and run but he was too scared to move.

Mike wasn't what you would call athletic and he could just imagine his damn luck would be to try and run and stumble, only for the man to then slit his throat for trying to get away.

The man fumbled with his wallet and then swore loudly. "Are you fucking with me?! There's ten dollars in here! Where's the rest?!"

The blade went back to Mike's throat and he started to hyperventilate. "T-that's all I have on me. I'm...I'm a student." He said feebly, already knowing that wouldn't be acceptable to the man.

"You think you can be funny?! You little sh - " But what else he was about to say or do Mike didn't know, because suddenly the knife flung out of the man's hand and went flying off into the distance.

"What the fu – AH!"

Mike couldn't believe his eyes as the man was flung away from him as if there was an invisible hook around his waist that had yanked him away, more like flew him away.

"Go." A female voice called, her tone low and intimidating.

Mike heard the drunk man scramble to his feet and when he finally had the courage to turn his head again, he squinted in the darkness, just seeing the silhouette of the man running as fast as his heavy body would take him.

"Are you okay?" The same feminine voice asked, but this time the anger was gone and there was concern in her soft voice.

Mike gulped and turned to the source of the noise. He jumped slightly seeing as this girl had a creepy looking mask on hiding her face.

"Er...um...yeah?" He said feeling scared that she was going to try and mug him too if her dark clothing was anything to go by. From what he could see in the darkness she had dark ripped jeans on, matching a black ripped top underneath a heavy black coat.

"Oh, I forgot..." The girl mumbled before lifting the mask, so it went into her sleek dark hair which was gelled back.

It might have been dark outside, but Mike suddenly felt as if a warm light had erupted into his heart when he looked at this girl. She was pretty, really pretty.

He felt his jaw drop as he took in her rose petal lips, her soft looking skin and her mesmerising eyes. Her eyes looked like they had specks of gold in them and his cheeks blushed as he watched her gaze stare back at him, taking in his features too.

They stayed like that for a moment until she looked down at the grass, leaning down to pick something up that Mike couldn't see. He was too busy still staring at her to notice anything else.

"Michael Wheeler," She said quietly to herself, looking down at something in her hands which Mike quickly realised was his wallet and by the way her beautiful lips curved into an amused smile, he cringed knowing she was looking at his student ID.

"I-It rained that day, so my hair went all curly." He quickly explained feeling his cheeks blush when he suddenly remembered that he was still lying in the grass and looking like a wastoid. Mike huffed and quickly sat up on the grass, his cheek damp from the ice.

Her finger gently traced the photo and she smiled to herself, "pretty" she whispered making Mike's eyes immediately widen, unsure of what to say. She looked down at him but her smile faltered when she

saw his chin.

"You're hurt." She said concerned, kneeling down to his level on the grass and reaching out to gently touch his injury, he tried to be brave and not flinch when her finger collided with the cut.

"It's nothing." Mike tried to say nonchalant, not wanting to appear weak to this pretty girl, even though she had just saved his life and not the other way around.

In that moment Mike was brought out of the shock of seeing such a beautiful girl and remembered everything else that had happened.

"Wait a minute...did you see that guy? He like flew through the air. And his knife too!" He hurried to say, feeling like his own words were crazy but surely this girl had seen it all too?

She immediately looked nervous and averted her eyes. "No...I...I didn't see it." She mumbled, her hands wringing together anxiously and despite the fact that they had only met and that he didn't even know her name, Mike felt like he could read her.

"Did you...did you make him fly?" He gasped, staring at her with stunned eyes and noticing her panic which immediately made him feel guilty. "I won't tell anyone! I...I promise."

She bit her lip nervously and her eyes which looked scared seemed to soften at his words. "You promise?" She whispered.

Mike nodded his head and scrambled to his feet. "Yeah I promise." He gulped, trying to ignore the fact that she was short and really cute if you looked past the whole intimidating punk look.

The girl was about to open her mouth to say something when there was a noise and both the girl and Mike snapped their heads in fear towards the sound.

"Where did you go?" Another female's voice called, and Mike realised that she was talking to the pretty girl who cringed and averted her eyes to the floor.

"We need to go Eleven." A deep voice of a man boomed, and Mike

flinched when he realised there was five of these people all stood a distance away in similar masks to what the pretty girl had worn.

Mike's eyes widened when he realised they looked like the kind of people that you really didn't mess with.

The girl nodded almost hesitantly, and Mike's realised she was responding to Eleven. "Eleven? That's your name?" he asked her in surprise.

She turned back to him, her eyes wide and nervous but she nodded quickly before handing him back his wallet. He clung to it and watched helplessly as she pushed the mask down and turned to her gang.

"Wait!" Mike called as she started to walk away. She turned slowly and he gulped, not even sure what it was he wanted to say, but wishing she didn't have to go.

"T-thank you for saving my life." He said in one breath.

She shrugged slightly and Mike hated that he couldn't see her face. "I didn't want you to get hurt." She said in a soft voice that just did something to Mike's heart which he felt fluttering in his chest.

"Can I...can I see you again?" he asked as bravely as he could.

She sighed and shook her head. "That's...that's not a good idea."

"But – " Mike began to protest but she had turned back to her gang and was hurrying over to them. He didn't know what happened next, but they seemed to disappear altogether.

Mike looked around in confusion, almost still feeling her presence as if she was walking past him but unable to see her.

"I'll find you." He whispered into the cold night. "I promise."

AN: Thank you for reading :-)) The next chapter will be longer but I just wanted to give you all a feel for the story and get some feedback to see if you're interested by this story or not. So please review!

Thank you.

2. Jedi's and Princes

Part of Your World

AN: Thank you so much for the feedback on the first chapter. You're all amazing! :-)

Chapter 2: Jedi's and Princes

16th January 1992

A loud yawn was stifled from the clerk working the night shift at a local convenience store next to the University of Chicago. He had only been at work for an hour, but he was bored and ready to go home. He rubbed a hand over his face hoping to wake himself up before going back to drumming his fingers against the cash register.

The bell above the door tinkled loudly and the clerk looked up expectantly, only to frown when he realised there was no one there. He didn't notice the security cameras moving away to face the wall or how in the back office the screens were turning from clear shots of the colourful store into undistinguishable grey and black static.

He blinked and then shrugged his narrow shoulders, "man I'm more tired than I thought," he mumbled to himself as he adjusted on his stool.

"You have a leak."

The boy practically jumped out of his skin at the cool female voice that suddenly broke the silence of the store. He looked up to see a dark-skinned girl, with deep brown eyes and an intimidating stature.

She was pointing to the door that led off to the back fridge and the office. As the clerk followed her gaze, his eyes widened in surprise to see water leaking out from under the door.

"Oh fuck," He mumbled in annoyance before getting off his stool and hurrying to fix whatever the problem was.

Kali watched him go with a smirk before turning around where Axel, Mick, Funshine, Dottie and Eleven now stood, no longer cloaked from the eyes of the store clerk.

"Let the supermarket sweep begin," Axel grinned wickedly, his eyes already on the cash register.

In unison the group all put on their masks and dispersed, grabbing as many items as they could, stuffing them into two large duffle bags that Funshine was holding. Axel cackled with glee as he emptied the cash register whilst Kali kept her focus on keeping up the water leak.

Eleven threw candy into Funshine's bag, and with a hasty look at her friends, she rolled up a magazine and stuffed it into the inside pocket of her coat.

"Right let's get going," Mick called, her voice serious as she finished stuffing cigarette packets into one of the duffel bags. The group all nodded, walking with purpose to the store entrance before Kali took her focus off the water leak and Eleven moved her head slightly so that the security cameras in the store started to go back into place.

The gang walked quickly away from the store, as they always did following one of their raids. The bitter night air was keeping most people indoors, but Kali still shielded the group with her powers so that they could disappear into the dark blanketed night.

"We should have waited for the van to be fixed," Mick muttered as she rubbed her hands together to try and ward off some of the shivering cold.

"Oh, come on, it was an *adventure*!" Axel called, his voice muffled behind his mask. But the tone of his voice told the group that he was grinning widely, showing off the gap in his teeth from a recent fight.

"We'll be home soon," Kali spoke calmly, her concentration focused on keeping the gang out of plain sight.

Home. It was a word that still intrigued Eleven. And as they walked quickly, their shoes crunching in the frozen grass she thought about the two homes she had ever known.

The first being the lab. For as long as Eleven could remember, the lab was her home. She didn't know a life before it and had only known life after it for 3 years now. It had taken Eleven 12 years before she realised that the lab wasn't home. It was a prison.

Kali was older and had understood sooner than Eleven; whispering to her when they were occasionally allowed to mix together that they were in a prison and they needed to escape. Eleven didn't realise that spying, searching for enemies and being punished with rods that shot out electricity wasn't normal.

But she had listened to her sister, admiring her and following her in anything she said. On a stormy night in November 1989, Kali used her powers to confuse the guards into opening her cell. She had made them hear screams inside of the block and when they came running in, she ran out and locked them in with a dark satisfaction.

Kali had moved down the corridors with ease, her powers shielding her from the occasional doctor or soldier that stood on guard. To get into Eleven's cell, she had killed two guards, no remorse in her face as their lives were ended. The years of abuse had changed her and now all she wanted was revenge.

Once she had unlocked Eleven's cell and grabbed the frightened 18-year-old girl's hand, they had run. Kali guarding them when she could with her powers and Eleven protecting them when the guards caught on to what was happening and chased after the girls with stun guns.

Eleven had screamed in fury, years of suppressed fear and anger mixing together as she flung the guards away from them, their bodies flying through the air and hitting the concrete walls.

The two girls stumbled out of Hawkins lab, their bare feet cut by the tarmacked floor and their bodies frail from malnourishment. They took one loud gasp of freedom as they stared up in awe at the sky, never having seen stars or the beauty of midnight.

The moment only lasted a second as the sirens inside of the lab went off, the girls clutching hands and running into the forest, disappearing within the wilderness.

Eleven blinked, looking around at the darkness of the park and then glancing ahead of her to the group that were all talking animatedly except for Kali who was her usual quiet self as she continued to use her powers.

The gang were her other impression of home, or more specifically the old abandoned warehouse down by the docks that they *called* home. It wasn't exactly the dream home, but each gang member had made their personal space their own. Eleven's room was furthest away from everyone else's and she liked it that way, it made it easier for her to be her true self. The self that she was scared of the others seeing.

Eleven was abruptly ripped from her own thoughts as she heard a distant strangled yelp closely followed by the sound of a heavy thud. She frowned, squinting into the darkness that surrounded the park.

Kali and the others either hadn't heard the noise because they were too busy talking and laughing about their most recent excursion, or they didn't care about the sound.

Eleven could hear muffled voices and she halted, nibbling on her lower lip anxiously, wondering what she should do. They never interacted with anyone that wasn't in the group, unless it was to gain something, such as food and cash or either warding off other gangs who wanted their warehouse. They fought their own battles and no one else's.

But something about the panicked voice was making Eleven turn away from the only people she knew and walk in the direction of what could be impending danger or a potential exposure risk.

"My...my wallet. I-It's in the backpack. At the front."

Eleven frowned, her legs pumping quicker bringing her closer to the person that was in need. The person she suddenly *knew* she had to save, no matter what happened.

As she got closer two silhouettes appeared, outlined only by the moon on the dark bitter cold night. One of the forms was face down on the ground, their arms sprawled out and their body shuddering either from fear or the freezing temperatures, although Eleven

suspected it was a combination of both.

She saw the second figure; a large man who was fumbling with a small object and then abruptly cursed. "Are you fucking with me?! There's *ten* dollars in here! Where's the rest?!"

Eleven moved quicker when she saw the sheen of a blade being pressed onto the neck of what she could now make out was a young man. "T-that's all I have on me. I'm...I'm a student." He said weakly. The fear in his voice angered Eleven and her eyes darted to the mugger, wanting to make this pathetic excuse for a man pay for putting such terror into what she could tell was usually a gentle voice.

Her arm stretched out and her head lowered, Eleven's eyes narrowing with anger as she stared at the thief.

"You think you can be funny?! You little sh - "

His knife was torn from his grasp, landing far away in the crunching iced grass.

"What the fu – AH!"

Eleven's eyes were dark with hatred as she clenched her fist and made the mugger fly away from the student. She heard his screams of terror as she added more force to his landing, making him grimace in pain.

He blinked in the darkness and his eyes widened in horror when he took in her form, his stare fixated on the creepy mask she was wearing. The white of the plastic was almost illuminous in the dark and made the image even more haunting.

"Go." She snarled through gritted teeth, her fists clenched at her sides as she fought the urge to destroy this man for what he had done to the scared student.

He didn't need to be told twice, stumbling to his feet and running, falling over now and again from shock before disappearing into the darkness.

Eleven exhaled, feeling some of her anger subside. She turned to the male who was still sprawled on the grass and watching in astonishment as the mugger ran away.

She could only see the back of his head which was covered in floppy dark hair that even in the darkness looked incredibly soft. Her fingers twitched involuntary and she felt a strange urge to stroke the dark locks. Her hazel eyes moved across his lanky frame and she smiled slowly behind her mask, her expression softening.

"Are you okay?" she asked him gently, concern flowing into her voice as she realised how rigid he was.

He turned his head towards her just as the moonlight hit his face and Eleven felt her heart immediately stop and then speed up rapidly. *Oh wow.*

She didn't take in his jump of shock at her mask, completely forgetting she had it on. In fact, she forgot her own *name* as she stared at the most beautiful face she had ever seen. Were boys meant to be this pretty?

"Er...um...yeah?" He said answering her earlier question, although Eleven couldn't even remember what she had asked him.

She noticed the fear in his posture and blinked, reality settling back into her brain when she realised with a sheepish grin that she still had on her mask. "Oh, I forgot..." Eleven mumbled more to herself as she pulled the white plastic back where it settled in her gelled hair.

As the boy stared at her El took the opportunity to greedily take in his own features. Her eyes ran slowly up and down his sharp cheek bones before lingering on his almost red lips that were such a beautiful contrast to his pale skin. Her pupils dilated as she stared into his eyes, feeling her breath hitch quietly.

His eyes were the most *captivating* thing she had ever seen. They were practically as dark as the midnight sky and immediately took Eleven back to her first time seeing the stars the moment her and Kali had walked out of the lab. His eyes reminded her of *freedom*.

Eleven knew that she had to eventually look away, remembering the time Dottie had told her that you shouldn't stare at people because it made them uncomfortable. She blinked and looked down, thankful that the darkness was hiding the blush that was slowly creeping up her cheeks.

When she looked at the ground, a small object caught her attention and she knelt down to pick it up. It was his wallet and it was spread open, exposing a starch white ID card that had a perfectly straight photograph stuck to it.

Her hazel eyes scanned the information and she repeated the name that she saw printed. "Michael Wheeler." She said quietly, making sure to commit his name to memory.

Her gaze then begged to stare upon the photograph and she found her lips quirk into an amused smile. In the picture Michael Wheeler had curly hair and a disgruntled look on his face, a half smile on his lips like he wasn't quite ready and widened eyes at the shock of the camera flashing before he could prepare himself.

"I-It rained that day, so my hair went all curly." He quickly explained before huffing out a breath of embarrassment and sitting up on the grass.

Eleven was still transfixed with the photo, her finger tentatively tracing over the shape of his face on the shiny card. "Pretty" she whispered unintentionally, too consumed with Michael Wheeler's picture to realise that she had said her thoughts out loud.

Her heart fluttered reminding her that the real student was in front of her and she looked down at him where he was sitting on the grass. She smiled for a moment before her eyes flickered to his bleeding chin which hadn't been obvious when he was lying face down on the floor.

"You're hurt." She said concerned, kneeling down to his level on the grass and reaching out to gently touch his injury. Her finger touched the graze and she frowned hoping that he would heal quickly. Something in her stomach clenched as she realised how much it upset her to see him injured.

"It's nothing." The boy said bravely, the warm breath from his words tickling Eleven's finger where she was still touching and assessing his injury. There was a comfortable silence for a moment before the boy gasped and spoke hurriedly, "wait a minute...did you see that guy? He like *flew* through the air. And his knife too!"

Eleven felt an immediate panic take hold of her body and she flinched pulling her fingers away from his injury and averted her eyes. "No...I...I didn't see it." She mumbled, wringing her hands together nervously as she realised how foolish her actions had been. But there was just *something* about this Michael Wheeler that had called to her, she couldn't allow him to be hurt or scared.

"Did you...did you make him fly?" He gasped making Eleven's eyes flood with panic at his honest answer. She couldn't understand how he wasn't scared, how he had accepted the possibility that she could just make a man fly without thinking she was crazy.

"I won't tell anyone! I...I promise." He added, clearing having seen the conflict written all over her face.

Eleven bit her lip nervously as she watched him, wondering what would happen if she was honest with him, if she opened up to this Michael Wheeler. "You promise?" she whispered.

The beautiful young man nodded his head and scrambled to his feet haphazardly. Eleven blinked when she realised how tall he actually was and that she had to crane her neck slightly to carrying on looking into his dark captivating eyes.

"Yeah I promise."

The sincerity in his voice broke down Eleven's walls and she opened her mouth, ready to tell him everything when there was rustle of noise and they both turned quickly to the source.

Eleven's stomach swooped as she realised the gang had found her. Kali was stood slightly in front and even though she was wearing her mask, Eleven knew she was frowning. "Where did you go?"

She cringed in embarrassment and shame for having wandered off

from the group, especially when Kali had been trying to keep them all protected under her shield of power. Eleven looked down at her beat up converse but didn't really want to explain how she couldn't stop herself from following Michael Wheeler's voice, that she had been pulled to him like a magnet.

"We need to go Eleven." Funshine's deep and yet understanding rumbled tone called to the young woman who nodded hesitantly, knowing with a twist of pain in her stomach that her time with the beautiful Michael Wheeler was over.

"Eleven? That's your name?" His voice called immediately causing Eleven to turn back to look at him. The softness in his voice warmed her heart and she nodded quickly, handing him back his wallet.

She sighed internally and set her jaw in determination as she pulled her mask back down and remembered that she couldn't spend all night staring at this young man, no matter how understanding, gentle or pretty he was.

With her mask back on, Eleven allowed her face to fall in disappointment at their parting and started to walk away, following her friends despite the pull that tried to desperately yank her back to Michael Wheeler.

"Wait!" he called, an urgency in his voice that made Eleven turn towards him despite the fact that she knew it was wrong to do so. He didn't seem to know what he wanted to say for a moment, his eyes averting to the ground before locking in a gaze at her mask covered face.

"T-thank you for saving my life." He said in one breath.

El beamed underneath her mask but simply shrugged. "I didn't want you to get hurt." She said in an honest voice, not too scared about being truthful when she knew this would be the last time she saw this man.

"Can I...can I see you again?" he asked carefully, a bravery in his voice that made Eleven's heart swoon.

She sighed and shook her head. "That's...that's not a good idea." Her heart immediately dropped, and she felt a frustration rise in her body as if it was angry at her.

"But – " He began to protest whilst Eleven clenched her teeth and painfully turned back to the gang, hurrying after them and knowing that if she looked back at him, even for a second she would never be able to leave.

"What was that?" Kali whispered harshly as they walked back towards the warehouse. She had given Eleven the silent treatment for the last fifteen minutes, but clearly she couldn't contain her anger any longer.

"He...he needed help." Eleven mumbled feebly, thankful that Kali couldn't see her flushed cheeks and the dimmed light in her eyes from having to leave him behind.

Kali exhaled through her nose and shook her head, "that was not our concern Eleven. You could have been seen by anyone. Do you *want* to go back to the lab?"

Eleven flinched, deciding not to tell her sister about using her powers to save Michael Wheeler. "No," she muttered in response to Kali's question.

"Well then you can't be helping strangers Eleven. We *need* to stick together if we want to survive, and if we want to get rid of the bad men."

Eleven nodded solemnly as they walked across the dock towards their rusting warehouse. She knew Kali was right, she needed to be focusing on locating and killing off the bad men. That was what they had been doing for the past three years, the only ones left now were Papa and a few of his closest associates.

Eleven came to a halt and turned to her sister who immediately stopped walking too. She reached out and grasped her hand, squeezing it gently. "I'm sorry Kali," Eleven whispered, feeling guilt sink into her stomach at the thought of being exposed and being taken away from her sister or worse, getting Kali into trouble too.

Her older sister sighed and pulled Eleven into a hug, "it's okay." Kali said calmly, propping her chin on her young sister's shoulder for a moment. "Just don't do it again." She added more seriously as she pulled back, however the comforting grip on her hand told Eleven that she wasn't too mad.

The sisters carried on walking, the air not as stifled with tension and clearer now that they had spoken. It was very late by the time that they had got back to the warehouse, but Eleven found herself wide awake from the events of the evening. Mick, Dottie, Funshine, Axel and Kali all went their separate ways, yawning and chuckling with one another about their store raid.

Eleven dropped off her concealed Cosmopolitan magazine in her room before showering, warming up her shivering body and washing the dark eyeliner off her face and the sticky gel from out of her hair. She trudged into her room and dried off, changing into soft pink pyjamas that the gang had turned a blind eye to her picking out when they raided a department store for clothes.

She turned on her fairy lights, which added a warm glow to her room and made her feel safe. Eleven pulled back her pink and purple patchwork duvet and got cosy in her bed, adjusting her head against the pillows as she stared at the small tv on the dresser in front of her.

She flicked her head slightly bringing the screen to life and narrowed her eyes causing the VHS tape to rewind to the beginning of her favourite film *'The Little Mermaid'*. Eleven grabbed one of her smaller pink pillows and hugged it to her chest, smiling warmly as she watched the bright colours of the Disney film come to life. Her wet hair was drying into wild curls and she breathed a sigh of relief, *finally* feeling like herself again.

Eleven watched the film avidly, her doe eyes wide with awe and a smile on her face as she chuckled at Sebastian the crab and sympathised with Ariel wanting more than what her father had planned out for her.

Her eyes brightened with excitement when her favourite song started to play and Eleven sang quietly to herself, not wanting the others to hear her and know about her obsession with these wonderful Disney

films.

"Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun! Wandering free, wish I could be part of that world..." Eleven's voice was soft and almost a whisper as she let the lyrics fill her heart.

She watched eagerly as Ariel swam up to the ship and saw Prince Eric for the first time. Eleven had always swooned over him and felt jealous of Ariel, but now as she looked at him she felt a blush creep up her cheeks when she realised he wasn't as beautiful as Michael Wheeler.

Eleven sighed heavily and clutched the pillow tightly to her chest as she bit her lip and dared to smile dreamily as she thought about the tall dark-haired young man with the red lips, sharp cheek bones and dazzling eyes.

She could barely concentrate during '*Under the Sea*', her mind too occupied with the beautiful man that she had saved. Eleven looked up at the ceiling and felt a sappy grin fill her face as she imagined some of her favourite Disney scenes but instead of Prince Charming, the Beast or Prince Eric, it was Michael Wheeler dancing with her or confessing his undying love to her.

She practically melted during '*Kiss the Girl*' imagining being in a boat with the cute raven-haired man. But unlike Eric and Ariel, Eleven and Michael Wheeler would actually kiss, and it would be *perfect*.

When the film was over Eleven turned onto her side and sighed into her pillow with a goofy smile on her face. She closed her eyes and dreamt of the dark amber eyes, as wide and beautiful as the sparkling night sky and realised that maybe Disney Princes *did* exist...

Mike pelted at full speed to get back to the dorm as quickly as possible. Not only was his mind on high alert of any other attackers, but his brain was screaming with what he had seen Eleven do. As he raced up the three flights of stairs to his room, he knew that there was no better person to discuss this with than his roommate who just happened to be one of his three best friends.

"Dustin." Mike whispered frantically, still shaking with adrenaline as he shoved the curly haired boy's shoulder making him rock in his bed until he startled and awoke.

"Jesus Mike! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?" Dustin groaned as he rubbed at his tired eyes. "And where have you been?" his best friend yawned loudly as he shook the last of the sleep out of his face.

"Dustin listen to me, I have just met the most *incredible* woman and she just did the most *amazing* thing I've ever experienced!" Mike gasped, his heart still hammering as his memory flashed images of her beautiful face into his mind.

Dustin snorted, "what did she do? Have sex with you?"

Mike choked on his breath and flushed bright red. "N-No you idiot!" he shouted affronted, his skin warming even at the thought of doing anything so intimate with Eleven.

Dustin huffed and sat up in his bed, he was about to argue back when he caught sight of the cut on Mike's chin and frowned. "Dude what happened to your chin? And why do you look like you've been rolling around in the snow?" He asked in confusion.

Mike looked down at his clothes and realised how wet and muddy they were from face planting the icy grass. He sighed and thought about Eleven seeing him like this, *great first impression Wheeler. Nice job!*

He turned his gaze back onto Dustin who seemed to have sobered up from his sleeping state and was watching his best friend with intrigue. Mike shuffled over and sat on the end of the bed facing Dustin.

He raked a hand through his hair as the events of the evening flashed through his mind. His stomach clenched slightly as he remembered the fear he had felt during the attempted mugging and then the utter disbelief and awe at being not only saved in such an amazing way but saved by the most *beautiful* woman Mike had ever seen in his life.

"Okay...well I was leaving campus," Mike began, explaining to Dustin how he was working late on the assignment, no thanks to his best friend's suggested Star Wars marathon and then walked through the park as a short cut home.

He paused with a shaky breath, clenching his fists slightly as he explained the attempted mugging and how the man had put a pen knife to his throat.

"Holy shit Mike!" Dustin yelled, scrambling to sit further up the head board. "Are you okay? Did he get you?!"

Mike couldn't help but snort, "Dustin I think if he *'got me'* I wouldn't be telling you this story right now."

Dustin sighed in relief as some of his concern deflated. "Okay well how did you stop him? You're not exactly a fighter Mike..." his friend said with a slight smile of playful goading.

Mike's heart tremored, and his fingers twitched as the memory of Eleven pulling back her mask and showing her face moved to the forefront of his mind. He found himself smiling dopily which only seemed to confuse Dustin more. But his friend merely frowned and tried to wait patiently for an explanation.

"I...I was saved by this incredible girl." Mike said breathlessly, ignoring the snort from Dustin. "She got the knife off the mugger and made him to run away."

"Woah did she use like martial arts to kick his ass?!" Dustin asked with interest, unable to stop himself from getting excited about such a cool girl existing. Especially one that his best friend *clearly* liked if his heart eyes were anything to go by.

At Dustin's question Mike blinked coming back to reality. He bit his lip anxiously and his expression turned serious. "That's the thing..." he whispered as his heart sped up. "Dustin, I think...I think she's like Will..."

Dustin stayed quiet for a moment in silence, his mind trying to catch up with Mike's train of thought. "You mean that she has...powers?"

he asked, whispering the last word and shifting his gaze as if thinking that someone could be overhearing them.

Mike nodded solemnly, and Dustin shook his head in wonder. "Wow..." he croaked.

"Exactly," Mike exhaled in a hushed voice as he stared ahead at the wall for a moment. "But I think her powers are *different* to Will's. Like I think she made the man fly away from me, and his knife. It was like she was a Jedi. I asked her about it but before she could answer, these other people arrived."

Dustin's eyebrow raised in curiosity, "other people?"

Mike nodded and tried to resist the urge to shudder at how intimidating they had all looked in their masks. "Yeah. She went with them." He said feeling his shoulder slump at the fact that she had disappeared into the night.

Dustin frowned, and they were both silent for a moment, taking in all of this new and shocking information. "Hey! Do you think the others all had powers too?" the curly haired boy asked eagerly.

Mike poised his lips in thought. There was certainly a strong possibility that the rest of the group had powers too. Perhaps that had been *why* they were hiding their identities?

His thoughts strayed to Will for a moment, remembering how Joyce had reiterated to the boys that they could never tell anyone about Will's powers. That if people knew then he would be in danger.

Mike sighed and looked at Dustin, "I mean it is a possibility." After all if Will had a power Mike could only assume there had to be others out there with similar gifts. He just couldn't believe he had been saved by someone with those gifts, someone who he couldn't forget.

"I have to find her." Mike blurted out.

Dustin smirked, "was she hot?" he teased making Mike splutter and go red.

"S-She...I'm not...I mean, y-yeah..." He mumbled feebly, staring

down at the quilt whilst Dustin gave him a shit eating grin.

"Hey maybe she'll become Michael Wheeler's virginity stealer!"

"Shut *up* Dustin!" Mike shouted hotly with embarrassment whilst Dustin barked with laughter. He huffed before taking a deep breath and mumbling "it's not like that." She was special and even at the sheer thought of her Mike's heart raced.

"I just...I want to find her, I want to know more about her." He said quietly, embarrassed at his overwhelming need to see her again.

Dustin smiled and clasped his hands together enthusiastically, "well let's find her then! First thing tomorrow. We can search the student directory and see if she goes to college too."

Mike coughed awkwardly and looked down at his lap, "um, well I didn't really get her full name. One of the gang members called her Eleven..."

"Eleven?" Dustin remarked in disbelief. "That can't be her name. That's got to be like her gang name or something."

Mike's shoulders slumped in defeat and Dustin quickly backtracked. "But we'll check. We'll see if there's anyone with the name Eleven and we'll go from there."

Mike looked back up at Dustin in surprise and couldn't help the grin on his face, "thanks man."

His best friend leaned forward and patted his shoulder, "no sweat. A party member requires assistance." Dustin said simply before adding, "I think we should get Will and Lucas involved too."

Mike nodded in agreement and they discussed their plans for the next day until Dustin yawned and Mike hastily let him go back to sleep.

The dark-haired boy had much more trouble falling asleep, laying in his bed and staring at the ceiling, replaying every second of his memories of Eleven. How kick ass she had been, how beautiful her soft features were, how sweet her concerned voice was and how cute she had looked when she had that amused smile on her face. Mike

sighed heavily, grinning like a fool as he realised that she was one incredible Jedi and that he simply *had* to see her again.

AN: Thank you for reading, I'd love to know what you thought :-)

3. Searching and Stalking

Part of Your World

Chapter 3: Searching and Stalking

17th January 1992

Eleven's eyelids twitched rapidly and beads of sweat clung to her forehead as one of her regular nightmares took hold of her unconscious mind.

She was back in the lab. They had captured her and stuffed a hood over her face, her powers rendered useless. All Eleven could do was scream and kick out as heavy hands wrapped painfully around her underarms and dragged her down the cold hallway. Her cries and pleas echoed in a haunting reverberation off the white clinical walls.

And whilst she could not see the lab, she could smell it. The smell of iodine and bleach hanging heavily in the air. It was a smell that she had come to hate and almost fear. But as she was pulled through a doorway and pushed down into a chair, there was something she feared more.

It was him. The man she had once called papa.

Her world was pitch black underneath the hood, she panted heavily against the thick material covering her face, her warm and panicked breath hitting her skin with nowhere else to escape.

The sound of another door creaking open made her breath hitch and she heard familiar footsteps, slow and determined as they came closer to her. Eleven could feel her heart hammering against her rib cage and her palms began to sweat.

She felt someone in her vicinity and felt the slight change in the air as they knelt down in front of her. Eleven was shaking, her chest trembling with every struggled breath, her eyes wet with tears. She already knew who it was before they spoke.

"Welcome home Eleven," came a soft voice. A voice that to the outside

world or a brainwashed child would seem comforting, professional and kind. But to someone who had experienced years of suffering, manipulation and abuse, that voice made Eleven's skin crawl.

"Aren't you happy to be home with your papa?" Eleven could hear the malice behind what she knew was a twisted smile.

"Y-You're not my p-papa," She gasped out, her body shuddering from fear and a deep-rooted childhood emotion. It was the love that she had felt for him when she was a young impressionable child, the feelings that had made him her papa that upset Eleven the most. Those emotions were now infected and rotting inside of her, feeding her revenge and enabling her ability to kill.

Eleven gasped as she felt his hands reaching for her hood, starting to peel it off. "No!" she shouted, unable to comprehend having to look into those piercing eyes again. She squeezed her eyelids shut and shook her head forcefully as she felt the material come clear of her face.

"Look at me Eleven."

"No!" She screamed, shaking violently. "No! No!"

"Eleven!"

"No!"

"Eleven wake up!"

Eleven gasped and immediately sat up, almost head-butting Kali who had been shaking her awake. She took one look at her sister, the familiar almost black eyes and the straight brown hair and burst into tears of relief.

She immediately collapsed into Kali's arms and letting her sister rub her back comfortingly. "It's okay," Kali whispered, her own voice shaking. "You are safe."

Eleven sobbed, her tears mixing with the sweat that clung to her face. She knew she didn't need to say anything to explain the nightmare because Kali got them too. Even though she tried to pretend that she didn't, Eleven recognised the same withdrawn look in her eyes after

she had awoken, sweating and trembling.

It took her a while before her sobs resided into quiet sniffles and Kali finally leaned back lifting her chin, her dark eyes appraising Eleven. "Are you okay?" she asked seriously.

Eleven closed her eyes, allowing the last of her tears to fall from her lower lashes. "Y-Yes." She gasped before opening her hazel eyes and staring back at her sister. "I'm sorry."

Kali smiled sadly and let go off Eleven's chin. "You do not need to be sorry Eleven. I want you to use this sadness and channel it to anger. Maybe *then* we can find him."

Eleven dropped her eyes to her patchwork quilt, her expression filling with guilt as she realised that the only reason Brenner wasn't dead was because of her.

Over the past three years they had no trouble tracking down other criminals from the Hawkins lab with just Eleven's powers. But Brenner was different. Every time she begrudgingly tried to search for him, she came up with nothing.

It was like he had built up a wall against her, but Eleven wouldn't admit to Kali or the others that she believed it was actually herself who had built the wall, too scared to look upon his face and see the man who had stolen her life for 18 years.

"I came to tell you that me, Axel and Funshine are leaving to speak with Axel's contact about obtaining more guns. Do you want to come?" Kali asked, her features set back into her usual level-headed expression.

Eleven shook her head, "no, I'll stay here. If that's okay?" Her heart was trembling, and her brow still felt sticky and hot. She wanted nothing more than to shower and curl up in bed with one of her favourite Disney films to wipe away the memories of her nightmare.

Kali nodded and stood up from the bed, "that's fine. I will see you later then, we should be back about six."

Eleven smiled softly in response and watched as Kali left her room.

She listened as her sister spoke with the others and then there was a quietness except for the sound of Mick and Dottie playing cards and goading each other.

Eleven sighed heavily, looking down at her body and frowning at how clammy she was. She grabbed a towel and headed for the shower, feeling immediately relieved when the water washed away the physical reminders of her nightmare.

She dried herself off and changed into black leggings, a tank top and a black hoodie which was way too big for her petite frame but cosy all the same. Eleven wouldn't exactly say this was her *style*, but she had no idea what kind of clothes she should be buying. When she sneakily read her Cosmopolitan magazines under her quilt, she couldn't help but awe at some of the fashion choices of the women, the whispered word "pretty" leaving her lips as she looked at the dresses.

Eleven sat on her bed, ready to distract her mind with a cheerful Disney film, but as she leaned back against her headboard, she found herself already thinking of something else. *Someone* else.

A smile slowly quirked on her lips and she looked up at the ceiling, her breath caught as she thought about those starry eyes and his almost red lips. In her daze Eleven's fingers gently brushed against her own lips and she closed her eyes wondering what it would feel like to be kissed by him. Kissed by Michael Wheeler.

Before she could even stop herself, her mind flashed with her memories of him before there was a sudden darkness and an endless silence. Eleven was used to the void, the water splashing against her feet and the blank space no longer scaring her. She knew how to work this space and it felt safe.

She turned and smiled weakly finding the man who had been a constant thought through most of the night before her nightmare had taken over. Eleven walked slowly to him, curious as to what he was doing.

Michael Wheeler was sat at a desk, looking ahead and occasionally writing notes. As Eleven got closer, she noticed that his lips were

poised, and his brow furrowed as if he was distracted from his lesson.

Eleven took him in greedily, her eyes tracing down his long nose, his high cheek bones, his well-defined jaw and his sparkling eyes. Her heart fluttered as she looked at his lips again and then she practically *swooned* when she noticed his knitted sweater.

"You are very handsome Michael Wheeler," El sighed watching him adoringly until she flinched when he abruptly looked up and caught her eye.

Her heart halted and she gasped as her breath got caught in her throat. Eleven's eyes were wide and alert as she stared back at him, wondering what he would say. But Michael Wheeler merely blinked in confusion, looking around his space and shrugged going back to his writing.

Eleven exhaled in relief but also frustration. She had hoped that maybe he would see her, or that she could at least pull him into the void with her. Maybe then she could actually speak to him again, which was something that she realised she was desperate to do.

A voice within her mind, which sounded very much like Kali told her that it wasn't safe to see Michael Wheeler. She would be potentially exposing the real Eleven and putting his life in danger in the meantime.

But as Eleven came back to her body and opened her eyes, she found that the need to see Michael Wheeler had become desperation. She sunk her teeth into her lower lip with worry, knowing if the gang even *knew* what she was thinking she would be in trouble.

But Kali, Axel and Funshine won't be back until 6pm. And Dottie and Mick won't care if you go out. Her mind was urging her, reassuring her that it would be okay just to have a quick look at Michael Wheeler. He didn't even need to *know* she was there.

Eleven's hazel eyes landed on the dresser where a collection of wigs were hoarded. She got up quickly from the bed and started to route through the draw, picking out a blonde wig and running the delicate strands through her fingers.

She exhaled a deep shaky breath of nerves and then smiled sheepishly, feeling giddy and excited about the possibility of seeing the most beautiful man in the whole world once again. Eleven had never been one to disobey or go against the rules of the gang, but for Michael Wheeler it would be worth it.

Mike *really* didn't want to be in class. He was distracted and on edge, trying to write his notes and listen to the professor but none of it was important anymore. Not when *she* was out there somewhere.

He sighed and scribbled a few more sentences, counting down the minutes until he could meet up with Dustin and go to the library to look on the school's system for any trace of Eleven.

Mike hadn't got a chance to talk to Lucas, Will and Max about Eleven just yet and he wasn't even sure *what* to say. Technically she hadn't admitted that what happened to the mugger was down to her. But Mike just knew it was. He could see it in her eyes, the fear and shock so present there. It hurt to have seen that dread in her expression and Mike found himself wanting to only see warmth in the hazel orbs.

He wanted to see her again so desperately that it was almost painful. Not that he would admit this to Dustin when he told him about Eleven, but it felt like a part of him was *missing*. Like she had taken one of his limbs or that she had always had a part of him, but he never noticed until the day he met her.

Mike had experienced crushes before and had even dated a few girls in high school. But this was *so* different with Eleven. He couldn't exactly put his finger on it, but these new emotions were kind of *alarming*. How was it possible to just go by your day to day life so normally, and then a second later your life suddenly had a new meaning. A new purpose.

Mike was dragged out of his own thoughts as the strangest sensation hit him. His head as if on its own accord moved slightly to the left and his eyes fixed on a point in the classroom. To others it would look like he was staring at the wall, but he wasn't.

It was as if there should be someone stood there but no matter how

much Mike squinted he couldn't get his vision to make out anyone. He blinked in confusion and looked around the class, wondering if anyone else had felt it. But his fellow students were either listening to their professor, doodling or sleeping. Mike sighed and ran a hand through his hair trying to make sense of it all. All he knew was that the answers were linked to Eleven, he could just *feel* it.

When the lesson ended Mike endured one more class before meeting Dustin on the main campus.

"You ready for this?" Mike asked his best friend bracingly, knowing that this wouldn't be a quick search.

Dustin smiled his signature cheerful grin and nodded avidly, shaking a bag. "At your service Paladin, and I brought snacks."

Mike grinned, of course Dustin had brought snacks. "thanks Bard. Let's get going." He turned and walked swiftly to the library, his fists clenched in determination whilst Dustin hurried along next to him.

The boys found a quiet area of the library right by the encyclopaedias and grabbed two computers, Mike waiting impatiently for them to load up as he drummed his fingers on his thigh.

Dustin's mouth was full of Nilla wafers as he typed in his details on the large screen, crumbs trailing down onto the keys of the chunky keyboard whilst he clicked away.

Mike exhaled in relief when he finally got to the home screen of the computer and eagerly brought up the student directory. He immediately typed in '*Eleven*' and waited with bated breath as the system searched for results.

'O Results'

"Shit," Mike groaned in disappointment.

Dustin leaned over to see the results and shrugged, "told you it would probably be her gang name."

"What should we do now?" Mike asked turning to his best friend and praying that he would have some answers.

Dustin however just removed his baseball cap to scratch at his head before pulling the cap back on. "Well, I guess we could search the whole student directory database. But there's probably *thousands* of students here – "

"Let's do that then." Mike said abruptly interrupting Dustin, clicking on a few screens to bring up the whole list of registered students. For every student the only details displayed was their student ID photo, their name and their dorm number if they had opted to share the information.

"Mike it'll take us *hours*..." Dustin moaned.

"So?" Mike asked distractedly as he started right at the top of the list. "You start at the bottom and we'll meet in the middle."

"Yeah by this time next week we'll have met in the middle." Dustin mumbled grumpily but didn't waver from scrolling to the bottom of the screen and looking over the student details before snorting.

"Mike you realise I don't know what she looks like right?"

Mike immediately blushed feeling idiotic for not thinking about this important detail. "Oh shit...well um s-she had shoulder length hair which was um brown...well it *looked* brown in the dark..."

"Anything else?" Dustin asked amused as he grabbed another Nilla wafer.

Mike looked into the distance and sighed heavily, "yeah, she had the most beautiful eyes. Like hazel with gold streaks in them. And she was short and slim, and she had this cute little button nose and a thin face and these pink lips that I swear had like a cupid's bow..."

He trailed off realising that Dustin was watching him with a shit eating grin. "You *love* her."

Mike immediately spluttered and turned bright red. "I-I don't *know* her!" He said quickly deflecting from Dustin's actual statement. When his friend merely smirked at him, Mike coughed awkwardly and stared at his screen. "Can we just look on the system. If you see anyone that sounds like who I described, just point them out okay?"

Dustin was still grinning but he nodded, "yes sir," saluting Mike teasingly before focusing on his own screen.

The boys worked in silence for a while, until Dustin snorted and pointed out a student ID to Mike who eagerly leaned in only to glare at his best friend who was pointing at the photo of '*Michael Wheeler*'.

"Look at your *hair*! No wonder you never let me see this photo." Dustin chuckled and wiped at tears of mirth whilst Mike gritted his teeth.

"It was raining *okay*?!"

There was a distance sound of a giggle and Mike started, the hairs on his back standing up as he quickly looked around the area, his head moving so quickly he was sure he would have whiplash.

He frowned not seeing any one and sighed to himself, wondering if he was losing it. Mike shook his head to try and dispel some of his confusion before going back to his screen. His eyes narrowed in concentration. "I will find you." Mike murmured quietly enough that Dustin wouldn't hear.

Three shelves away Eleven was watching Michael Wheeler intently with a large smile. She didn't know what he was doing, but his loud outburst about his hair had caused her to laugh loudly.

Thankfully no one else was lingering around the dusty encyclopaedias, and with her blonde wig and hood up, she was mostly obscured.

She couldn't see his face from this angle but settled for now just watching his form, how his shoulders seemed tense and his long fingers scrolled quickly through images. Eleven's eyes lingered on his hair and she gasped quietly, the need to run her fingers through the soft locks coming back with full force.

After an hour Eleven grew impatient, wanting to see his face again. She moved carefully, with skill learnt over the years and was unseen as she slunk behind heavy shelves filled with thick books that faced

Michael Wheeler and his friend.

"Is this her?" The curly haired man asked, causing the dark-haired beauty to lean quickly over to look at the screen before shaking his head with a sigh.

"No that's not her." Michael Wheeler muttered with disappointment before going back to his search.

Eleven frowned, wondering who they were talking about. She watched on and listened hard as the boys continued to talk.

"What do you think her name is?" The curly haired boy prompted before grabbing a Pringle.

Michael Wheeler exhaled heavily, and his nostrils flared slightly. "I don't *know* Dustin. That's why we're looking through thousands of students to see if she even goes to this college."

There was silence as both boys went back to their task and Eleven watched them both with interest, curious as to what their task was.

"I reckon her name is Katie," Dustin decided with a smile before frowning. "Or maybe she's a Heather. Or a Millie..."

"DUSTIN!" the handsome boy shouted in exasperation which earned him a *'hush'* from the librarian. Eleven glared at said librarian for being rude to Michael Wheeler and the books she had been sorting through immediately fell off their trolley with a clatter.

Eleven held her breath as the two boys turned to the source of the sound, Dustin not thinking much of it before going back to his Pringles, but Michael Wheeler kept his gaze on the books for a while. Eleven swallowed nervously and watched him with awe, loving how his thick dark eyebrows furrowed in thought.

What seemed like another hour passed before Dustin sighed and turned to Michael Wheeler, "sorry Paladin but I've got to get to class."

"Paladin," Eleven whispered to herself, the word started a curiosity trail in her mind.

"Yeah okay," Michael Wheeler exhaled deeply before giving Dustin a weak smile. Just seeing his lips quirk up like that made Eleven's heart race. "Thanks for helping me man."

"No problem dude," Dustin answered with a tap to his shoulder. "Want me to come back later?"

He bit his lip and nodded hesitantly, "yeah if you wouldn't mind. I'm going to stay here as long as I can."

Dustin grinned and stood up from his chair, picking up his bag. "This Eleven must be pretty special."

Eleven gasped in surprise, her eyes widening as their activity finally made sense. They were searching for *her*.

"She is," Michael Wheeler mumbled, his cheeks reddening as Dustin gave him one final smirk before waving and walking away.

Eleven's heart was pounding like mad as she watched the man of her dreams stare at the screen with a determination she had never seen before. Her heart fluttered, and her body felt hypersensitive. She couldn't stop the giddy grin spreading on her lips as she watched him trying to find *her*.

Fifteen minutes later guilt started to creep in. Eleven frowned remembering that he wasn't ever going to find her on that system because she didn't go to college. She had never even been to school before.

Just walk up to him. A part of her mind desperately urged, almost launching her forward of its own accord. But then she remembered the danger he would be in if he got to know her. Michael Wheeler was too special, too wonderful to be caught up in her world. No matter how desperately Eleven wanted to be part of *his* world.

She watched him sadly, realising that he meant it about staying there as long as possible to search for her on a system that she *knew* wouldn't give him any answers. Eleven bit her lip knowing that she didn't want to do this, but she had to stop him. She wanted to continue staring at him, but it wasn't fair to him and it wasn't fair to

her.

Eleven turned her eyes onto the machines and lowered her chin, concentrating until there was a popping sound and then a power cut, all of the computers simultaneously turning off as well as the lights in the building.

Her heart throbbed with pain as she heard Michael Wheeler give a shout of utter devastation and annoyance as the computer he was working on died with the rest of the system. His face fell into his palms and it took every ounce of strength for Eleven to turn away from him and retreat out of the back exit of the building, a tear running down her cheek as she felt the pull of her heart, desperate for her to turn back. But she couldn't.

Eleven got back to the warehouse two hours before Kali, and the others. She distracted herself by joining Mick and Dottie's game of cards, faking a smile that didn't reach her eyes. She retreated upstairs when Kali, Axel and Funshine returned with new guns that they proudly showed off to Mick and Dottie.

She changed into her pyjamas acting on autopilot whilst her heart lulled in pain thinking about Michael Wheeler. Eleven cleared her dry throat and pulled back her patchwork quilt, sinking into the bed with a heavy sigh of relief.

She stared at the television until *'Beauty and the Beast'* began playing. A small fleeting smile formed on her lips as she watched Belle singing about her poor provincial town. But for once Eleven couldn't distract her mind with Disney as her thoughts shrouded around the image of Michael Wheeler, the small grin she had seen him make today and the furrow of his brow as he determinedly searched for her.

Eleven grabbed her little pillow and clutched it to her chest, trying to ease her trembling breath as she was overcome with the need to see him once again. *It's not safe, it's not safe.* She reminded herself pleadingly.

But Michael Wheeler didn't seem to care. He was *still* trying to search for her. She knew that from visiting the void half an hour ago and watching him searching the area around the University of Chicago

with his friend Dustin.

Eleven's hazel eyes flickered back to the screen as Belle started a reprise of her song, rushing over the hills desperate for freedom and needing *more* in her life.

As Eleven whispered the song to herself, her heart pounded as the meaning behind Belle's words hit home and she realised what she truly wanted.

"I want adventure in the great wide somewhere. I want it more than I can tell. And for once it might be grand, to have someone understand. I want so much more than they've got planned..."

18th January 1992

Mike rubbed at his tired eyes before gripping hold of his torch and continuing to walk around the park, hoping that Eleven might appear just as she had two nights ago.

"Have you really been doing this all day?" Lucas asked, his teeth chattering from the cold as he flicked his own torch around the area.

"And yesterday." Dustin cut in before Mike could do more than open his mouth.

"Wow he must be in love," Lucas mumbled as they walked down the path.

Mike huffed, "that's...that's not the point okay? The point is that I need to find her. She might be like Will and...she's special okay?"

Lucas snorted, "she may *potentially* have powers like Will from what you've told me. But you don't get those heart eyes when you talk about *Will* only when it's about Eleven..."

"What are you talking about?" Mike complained, turning to Lucas who had been walking behind him.

"Mike seriously?"

"What?!"

Lucas grinned, "you honestly look like you're about to declare your undying love for her and ask her to marry you."

"Do not," Mike spluttered, his cheeks heating up considerably despite the cold January air.

"Do to!" Dustin and Lucas replied in unison, both of them snorting with laughter at Mike's exasperation.

"You're both jerks..." Mike muttered darkly, avoiding their amused gazes and pointing his torch around the icy park.

"Jerks who are helping you find a girl we've never met in the freezing cold." Lucas argued.

Mike sighed and turned to his friends, "I appreciate your help, I *really* do. Especially with Max and Will not being here to help."

"Shame on Max for working," Dustin sighed before shuddering due to the freezing breeze that rustled through the dark trees. "And what was Will's excuse again?"

"You know Joyce," Mike spoke softly. "She won't let him out of her sight after dark..."

"And for good reason." Lucas muttered seriously whilst Mike nodded solemnly in agreement.

The boys continued to walk the expanse of the large park, keeping their eyes out for any unusual activity. Mike would be lying if he said being in the park didn't bring back memories of the mugging, but he carried on walking, the need to find Eleven overseeing any fear of the dark and eerie location.

It was his second night searching the area, the first night him and Dustin looked around buildings close to the college campus to no avail. And now Mike felt a pull to where it all started but so far, his hunch had come up with zero results.

To make matters worse, as Mike, Lucas and Dustin walked along the

crunching frost bitten grass, the sky seemed to open up, releasing sheets of icy rain that made the boys immediately gasp at the downpour coating them.

"Shit!" Dustin exclaimed as he looked up at the skies and shivered.

Lucas was already dripping wet with icy rain and turned to Mike who was trying to pretend that he wasn't getting soaked and freezing to death. "Mike we've got to turn back."

"No." Mike said resolutely, gripping tightly to the torch and trying not to shiver too much as he moved the light around the trees.

"Mike I'm not f-freezing my a-ass off for someone I don't k-know!" Lucas called defiantly over the heavy rain as he wrapped his arms around himself to try and keep some warmth in his body.

"Well go then," Mike said swirling around to face his two friends. Rain was dripping down his face and it felt more like ice cubes were sliding down his skin. "I appreciate all of your help, and I don't want *either* of you out in this weather."

"We don't want *you* out in this weather!" Dustin groaned, both of his hands planted on top of his sodden baseball cap.

"I'll be fine," Mike said with a fake smile of reassurance.

"Do you promise that if you don't find her in the next half hour, you either go home or meet me and Lucas in the diner?" Dustin pressed, his expression serious and concerned.

Mike bit his lip, not really wanting to make that promise but knowing that he couldn't stay out in this weather for ages. He'd get too sick to carry on his search for Eleven otherwise. "Yeah, I promise." He finally said begrudgingly.

Dustin sighed in relief and turned to Lucas, "let's go then."

Lucas turned to Mike with a frown, "be careful okay?"

"I will be," Mike said before smiling at his two friends. "Thanks guys for helping."

Lucas and Dustin patted his shoulder as they passed and hurried off towards the bright lights of the college campus.

Mike sighed and looked around at the darkness, his eyebrows creasing in concentration as he carried on his search. He walked for a while, the grass soggy and freezing cold underneath his squelching converses.

"Where are you Eleven?" Mike whispered into the darkness of the night, the only sound of the sheets of rain that pattered heavily on his hoodie to keep him company.

Suddenly there was a rustling nearby and Mike gasped, spinning around and pointing his torch at...nothing. He sighed but then he heard movement again and rushed forward, only to slip on the sodden grass and yelp as he fell on his back on the soppy ground.

Mike closed his eyes and groaned at his misfortune. His head in the grass as he shivered and realised his whole back and legs were as soaked as if he had jumped into a lake. "*Fantastic*," he muttered darkly to himself, not even having the energy to move.

"You seem to fall over a lot."

"Tell me about it," Mike huffed in exasperation before all of the air left his body in one sharp gasp as the soft voice that had spoken made his eyes open wide in shock. He blinked...and blinked again as he realised that *Eleven* was stood over him, watching him an amused smile.

"Eleven." Mike croaked out, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"Michael Wheeler," she answered gently and held out her hand to help him up. Her warm smile immediately heated up Mike's shivering body and he felt as if he could be on a white sandy beach somewhere and not in an icy puddle.

He blinked, wondering if he had actually died and gone to heaven. *Well if I'm in heaven it's wet and dark*, Mike thought to himself as he sat up and hesitantly took Eleven's outstretched hand.

The moment their fingers touched Mike gasped feeling like a spark of

electricity had just ran up his arm and burst straight into his heart, making it race dramatically. He gulped and looked into her hazel eyes, seeing a brightness there that told him she felt it too.

Mike stood up and just stared at her, he couldn't even help it. She was looking up at him too, her dark hoodie stuck to her body from the dampness of the rain. Her eyes so alluring and her skin sparkling in the moonlight.

"I've been looking for you," Mike whispered, unable to take his dark eyes off the hazel orbs. They were like magnets drawing him further and further into her.

Eleven smiled softly and sighed, "I know."

AN: Ah they've finally reunited! In the next chapter you'll get to know more about Will's powers and we'll have the introduction of Max. Oh...and the beginnings of our Mileven fluff ;-)

Please review and let me know what you thought! Thank you as always :-)

4. Confessions and Eggos

Part of Your World

Chapter 4: Confessions and Eggos

18th January 1992

"I've been looking for you," Mike whispered, unable to take his dark eyes off the hazel orbs. They were like magnets drawing him further and further into her.

Eleven smiled softly and sighed, "I know."

Mike frowned at her words, ignoring the icy rain and the cold night. All he could focus on was Eleven's hazel eyes and how they captivated him, he felt almost frozen in place under her gaze. "You... know?" He said so quietly it was almost inaudible. How could she possibly know he had been looking for her? Unless...

Eleven smiled softly and Mike immediately swallowed nervously in response. "I've been watching you." She finally admitted before averting her eyes to the ground almost coy.

Mike gaped, completely stunned by her revelation. A million thoughts rushed through his mind, trying to map together everything that had happened in the past two days. He thought about how he almost *sensed* a presence stood by him in yesterday's class and then all of the craziness that went down in the library. From the books falling off the librarian's trolley to the building having a complete loss of power.

But what was most apparent in Mike's mind more than anything else, was the fact that she had been *watching* him. She wanted to see him too.

"You know, watching me could be considered stalking..." Mike spoke, unsure where his teasing manner was coming from, but the idea of her needing to see him just as badly as he needed to see her was

making him feel light and giddy.

Eleven blinked in surprise at his words and Mike worried he had gone too far until she slowly smiled, a lopsided grin that showed of a dimple in her cheek. His heart practically squealed like a little girl at how adorable she was.

"And what about you?" she asked softly, her eyes filling with amusement as she took him in. "You have been looking for me? Is that classed as stalking too?"

Mike spluttered, his frozen cheeks heating up despite the rain that dripped down his face. "N-No! I was just...I just...I needed to see you." He croaked out his final words, his confidence from a few moments ago slowly diminishing.

Eleven cocked her head to the side, a thoughtful look playing on her features. "Why did you need to see me?"

Her words weren't angry or nervous like Mike had suspected. After all, it wasn't exactly *normal* to be looking for a girl for two whole days no matter if it was blowing a gale and raining so much icy water that Mike wouldn't be surprised if he got hypothermia. Eleven just seemed *curious* and he knew he needed to give her some proper answers.

His dark eyes flickered over to the large trees that looked like a safe haven from the downpour. "Should we stand over there? And we can talk?" He asked, shuddering from the cold and watching her with desperate eyes, hoping she wouldn't get freaked out and leave.

Eleven watched him so closely that Mike felt goose bumps erupting on his skin that he was pretty certain weren't caused by the cold. Her stare was just so intense and *intimate*.

"Okay Michael Wheeler," she said in her soft quiet voice. "Lead the way."

Mike blushed and slowly trudged across the grass, making sure to plant his feet firmly on the ground having absolutely no desire to fall over in front of her *again*.

"Here will do," Mike said clearing his throat and gesturing to the foot of a large tree that was providing a canopy from the downpour.

"Here is fine Michael Wheeler." Eleven said as she unceremoniously dropped to the floor and crossed her legs underneath her.

Mike struggled getting down to the floor, reminding himself of a baby giraffe as he tried to coordinate his long limbs. He finally settled with his back against the trunk of the tree with his legs outstretched. He chanced a glance over at Eleven and couldn't help but smile.

"You don't have to call me Michael Wheeler by the way."

Eleven's brow raised with intrigue, "no?"

"Well, I mean my name *is* Michael Wheeler, but everyone calls me Mike. Well my friends do anyway..."

"And am *I* your friend?" Eleven asked, her palm on her chest distracting Mike for a moment before he coughed and nodded.

"Um s-sure, I mean if you want to be?"

Eleven smiled and shuffled slightly closer to Mike making his heart hammer against his rib cage. "Yes, I would like to be friends." They both grinned at each other, looking away sheepishly after a few seconds because the intensity was just too much.

Mike having completely forgotten what they were meant to be discussing grasped for something to talk about. "So, um, Eleven. Is that really your name?"

Eleven looked up at him and frowned, "I think so." She mumbled shrugging her shoulders. "That's what it says on my wrist..."

"Huh?" Mike asked in confusion, but a second later Eleven was rolling back the sleeve of her black hoodie to display a tattoo that was stark against her skin. Mike gaped staring at the numbers '011'. It was the strangest tattoo he had ever seen, looking more like a stamped mark than anything else.

"When did you get that?" he couldn't help but ask, hoping to get some

answers to all the mysteries surrounding her.

Eleven traced the tattoo with her forefinger and sighed, "I don't know when they did it. I always remember it being there."

Mike blinked, and his brow furrowed as a sickness started to litter the pit of his stomach. "Did...did someone tattoo you against your will?" he whispered, nervous about what her answer would be.

Eleven's hazel eyes flickered up to meet his and Mike felt the breath catch in his throat as he took her in, even looking scared or vulnerable she was still so beautiful, and he felt an overwhelming need to protect her.

"Yes," she whispered in return, her eyes dropping down to the ground. They were both quiet for a moment, Mike trying to process who could have done that to her. Was it her parents? Or one of those gang members? But before he could say anything, Eleven had lifted her head to speak.

"You said we could talk...about why you needed to see me?"

Mike gulped and nodded his head nervously, wondering if he was doing the right thing opening up to her. But as he looked into her eyes, so wide with wonder and curiosity, those same eyes that had stared down at him when saving his life, he knew he could trust her.

"The reason I asked you that night if you had, um...made that mugger fly was because I know someone who has...gifts too." Mike mumbled nervously but he didn't take his gaze away from Eleven, wanting her to believe him.

Her eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't say anything prompting him to continue. "Well my friend, Will, his gifts are different. None of us knew about his abilities, including him until the 5th grade. It was my fault actually," Mike said smiling gently as he recalled that particular day.

"Our friend Max has always been awesome on a skateboard and she dared me to try a few tricks because I always moaned that it was easy. Anyway, I sucked. Like *bad*. And I fell off and broke my arm."

Eleven was still listening with avid attention, her eyes representing those of a doe and making butterflies flutter in Mike's stomach, but he tried to steady his breathing and continue with the story.

"Will, Max, Lucas and Dustin, my two other best friends came running over and I was crying like a baby," Mike sniffed in amusement. "And they didn't know what to do, Will was holding my arm trying to inspect it and worrying about the injury and then it just...happened."

"What happened?" Eleven whispered, her eyes as wide as saucers as she hung onto every word Mike said.

"I felt this like warmth where Will was holding onto my arm, it didn't *hurt* anymore and then there was this gross noise, like the bone mending I guess and I was...healed."

"His power is healing?" Eleven asked quietly, awe written all over her pretty face. Mike couldn't help but smile and nod. But then his insides clenched as he realised what happened next.

"We were like ten years old and *really* dumb. We didn't think about consequences or what Will having powers could mean. To us he was like an X-Men character and we were reckless about telling people about him. Dustin even used it as a way to get girls, not that they ever believed the story." Mike snorted, shaking his head as he thought about his curly best friend.

"And sometimes Dustin, Lucas and Max would purposely hurt themselves to get Will to heal them because they wanted to know what it felt like. Anyway, this happened a lot until..." Mike's voice turned grave and weak and Eleven watched him curiously.

"What happened Mike?"

It was the first time she had said his name instead of '*Michael Wheeler*'. Hearing his preferred name rolling off her tongue so naturally was enough to make Mike's body temperature heat up and his eyes to soften before he realised what he had been trying to say.

"He almost got abducted." Mike explained solemnly, fear etching at

his voice. Eleven's breath hitched in surprise, but she allowed him to continue.

"He was biking home from school as normal and this van...it was chasing him, they tried to pull him into the back but whatever they were using on him, and he thinks it was a stun gun, wasn't working because his healing powers were rejecting it. He managed to run into the forest next to his house, we called it Mirkwood. He hid out there, climbing up a tree and heard these men saying they couldn't afford not to capture him, they needed his powers."

Eleven was staring transfixed at Mike and he noticed something in her eyes that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. It was as if she was replaying her own memory and he couldn't help but gulp, his palms sweaty when he realised she might have had a similar experience.

"But they didn't get him?" Eleven asked urgently.

"No. He managed to get home, explaining everything to his mom who rang the Chief of Police for help. He's actually a good cop and his daughter died when she was young, so he knew how scared Mrs Byers was about losing Will."

"Next thing we all knew, Will moved out here to Chicago with his mom and brother and the Chief explained to us why, saying how we couldn't talk about Will's powers anymore and what might have happened to him if he had been abducted. We felt terrible, we *still* feel terrible."

Mike looked down at his freezing cold hands, wringing them together anxiously as he realised how stupid they had been as children, they could have gotten Will killed or locked away for the rest of his life.

He froze when Eleven's palm closed over his joined hands, stopping their shaking movement. But whilst his hands had been calmed down, the rest of his body lit up like a firework at the contact. Mike hesitantly looked up at Eleven and exhaled sharply at the understanding smile on her face.

"You were a *child* Mike. It's not your fault."

Mike continued to stare at her, so drawn in by her that he couldn't think or feel anything that wasn't her. She reached up with her free hand to pull her hoodie closer to her face and Mike's eyes connected with her tattoo again. His stomach turned nastily, and his body felt instantly cold as a thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Where you...where you abducted by those men?" Mike asked in a hushed voice, not even daring to be louder, not wanting this question to be right.

Eleven's features turned sad and she looked down at her tattoo. "I was *always* with the bad men."

Mike's amber eyes widened in horror, "b-but what about your parents? You *must* have had a mom and a dad." He asked anxiously, terrified at the idea of Eleven being brought up by the same crazy men who tried to abduct Will. But the more he thought about her name, the more it made sense. His eyes flickered to her tattoo and he realised that she had never be treated like a *person*, she was an item, something that they had labelled as belonging to them.

"I must have had a mother but...but pa – *he* said she was dead." Eleven said, flinching when she mentioned a man.

Mike couldn't help but cover her palm with his other hand hoping to comfort her. "Why did they want you? What...what can you do?"

Eleven gulped nervously and met his eyes, her hazel orbs flashed between his own like she was trying to search for a threat before exhaling away her fear. "You were right the other night, I *do* have powers. I used them to save your life." She whispered, not keeping her gaze off Mike's. He was captivated, his mouth slightly parted as he listened to her soft voice.

"I can do things using my mind, the lab I grew up in used to make me do whatever they wanted. I started with crushing cans and then I could find people using my mind alone...Kali calls it telekinesis."

"Who's Kali?" Mike asked in a dry voice, still in shock from her admittance.

"Kali is my sister. She was abducted and brought to the lab when she was a child. I thought the lab was normal, *home*. But Kali knew that it wasn't, and she told me about the outside world, I used to dream about it..."

Mike's heart was pounding loudly as he tried to process the kind of life that Eleven had in the labs, he couldn't think of it without wanting to be sick.

"Kali can make people see whatever she wants them to see. We escaped three years ago using both of our powers and ran into the woods. We were so hungry and tired, we found a diner and this man. He was so kind, he looked after us, but they shot him, made it look like suicide."

Mike gasped, and his eyes widened in shock, "w-wait. Are you talking about *Benny*?"

Eleven looked up at him abruptly, her mouth gaped open. "Yes. How do you – "

"Was the lab you were in, in *Hawkins*?" Mike asked weakly, his heart fit to burst out of his chest.

"Yes." Eleven answered breathlessly, her eyes searching Mike's pale face as he ran a hand through his wet hair.

"I'm from Hawkins. All of my friends are, including Will...oh my god, the men who tried to abduct him were the same ones who had you and Kali." Mike gasped in horror, trying to understand everything.

"We all moved out of Hawkins, as soon as it came to college. We all wanted to be closer to Will and we wanted out of our small town. So, me and my friends, we all live in Chicago now."

Eleven just blinked, her brow furrowed as she too tried to comprehend how close they had been growing up, having no idea that the other person existed or how different their childhoods were.

Mike watched her shuddering against the cold and it was the first time in a while that he remembered they were out in the dark cold night with sheets of rain hammering down on the ground. He took in

her soaked clothes and felt a pang in his heart to keep her warm and safe.

"Do you want to come back to my dorm room? I...I know that sounds like creepy, but you can wait there with me if you want until the storm is over and I can get us a hot drink and maybe some food." Mike asked hopefully, although he tried to forget that he was a terrible cook.

Eleven bit her lip hesitantly and looked out into the darkness of the park in thought. She seemed to be having an internal battle with herself before finally releasing her lower lip from her teeth and smiling gently. "Yes. Thank you, Mike."

He couldn't help but sigh in relief and grin warmly at her, stumbling to his feet, holding onto the tree for dear before righting himself. Mike coughed awkwardly, trying to pretend he was suave and not a blundering idiot before holding his hand out for Eleven who gave him an amused grin before taking his hand and letting him pull her up.

They released their hands from each other and Mike tried to hide his disappointment at the loss of contact. "Um, my dorm is this way." He mumbled, gesturing into the distance.

Eleven nodded and walked into step with him across the grass. She seemed to watch how he was planting his feet carefully on the wet ground and smiled coyly, "I think for your safety I should hold your hand Mike."

Mike's eyes widened, and his cheeks flushed red. He was thankful for the dark night, hoping she wouldn't see the blush. "Y-Yeah sure. Um for safety reasons of course..."

Their hands met, and their fingers laced together of their own accord. It felt warm, it felt exciting, it felt *right*.

Mike looked ahead as he walked, trying to hide the pleased grin on his lips but failing miserably. He chanced a glance at Eleven, quickly looking away when she turned her head towards him. He counted to ten and looked at her again, only to quickly whip his head back

because she was already staring at him. He heard her giggle and then found himself chuckle bashfully in response.

They carried on walking for a while in silence, Mike knowing it would only take another ten minutes before they reached his dorm. He couldn't quite believe the turn of events and even though he really did plan to just get Eleven a hot drink and something to eat, he was praying that Dustin wouldn't be back yet. He kind of wanted to keep Eleven to himself, just for now at least.

"Just for the record, your attempts at finding me on the college system wouldn't have worked." Eleven blurted out, a teasing smile on her face when she noticed Mike's bulging eyes.

"Oh my god that *was* you! You were there weren't you?" he asked immediately, his voice excited like a child.

Eleven giggled at his eagerness making Mike's cheeks blush. Her laugh had to be the sweetest sound he had ever heard. "Yes, I was there." She finally said.

Mike huffed in frustration, shaking his head. "Why didn't you just come up to me?"

She shrugged and gave him a weak smile, "because I shouldn't be around you. I shouldn't be walking with you *now*..."

"Why not?" Mike asked in surprise, his stomach flipping at the thought of not being allowed around her. He could feel a pull to her, he had since that first night and he knew it wasn't going anywhere, in fact it only seemed to grow with intensity.

"Kali and the others...they would say it was dangerous to be around you. Dangerous because you know our secret but also dangerous for you. And they're right..." Eleven muttered, her eyes sad and withdrawn as she looked down at the frost-bitten grass in front of them.

Mike frowned, "Why is it dangerous? Because of the bad men?"

Eleven nodded, "we've been tracking them over the last three years, making them pay for their crimes as Kali says..."

Mike gulped, already knowing what Eleven meant but needing to hear it from her. "H-How do you make them pay for their crimes?"

Eleven immediately glanced up at him, locking eyes and giving him a look. It was a look that made it all so obvious and he knew his worst fear was realised. But as Mike took in the soft and pure features of her face, he knew that she must have been through something truly terrible to go to the lengths of finishing those involved. And if it was someone else, maybe he would disagree, but with Eleven he found himself agreeing with everything she did.

"I understand." Mike said simply whilst Eleven gasped in surprise.

"You do? Don't you think I'm a...monster?"

He couldn't help but smile at her question and shook his head, "no Eleven I don't think you're a monster. I think the *bad men* are monsters, for keeping you and Kali prisoner and trying to abduct Will."

Eleven exhaled and Mike could practically feel the relief rolling off of her. She smiled sheepishly and looked up at him as they crossed onto the concrete, neither of them mentioning how they technically didn't need to hold hands now that they were no longer on the wet grass.

"So Mike," Eleven began, a lot more chirpy than she had been a few minutes ago. "Why don't you like Michael?"

Mike couldn't help but laugh, he just felt so happy and free with her. "Well I don't hate Michael, it's just what my parents call me, and it gets annoying. So, I prefer Mike."

"I like them both," Eleven said quietly, Mike looked down at her and grinned when he saw her cheeks had gone slightly pink despite the water droplets running down them from the rain.

"My friend Dustin, the one you probably saw at the library, he couldn't believe your name was Eleven. He thought it might be your gang name." Mike chuckled as they walked closer to the dorm, the building now coming into view.

Eleven sighed, "I wish I had a nice name like Mike."

He turned to her in surprise and watched her face, an odd thought occurring to him as he started at her. She didn't suit Eleven, that was obviously not the name she was intended to be born with. But she did suit – "El." Mike blurted out.

Eleven stopped walking, bringing him to a halt as well, as they turned slightly to look at one another. She looked at him questioningly and Mike swallowed slowly, feeling oddly nervous. "Um, what about instead of Eleven I call you *El*. Short for Eleven."

"El," Eleven said slowly, repeating it a few times with a concentrated look on her face that made Mike smile sheepishly. Her hazel eyes moved back onto him and she grinned slowly, "I like El."

"I like El too." Mike said in a quiet and dry voice before coughing and blinking as he realised how his words could be construed. "I m-mean I like the name El for you."

El giggled and yanked his hand in her own to get him to start walking again, Mike took a deep breath mentally telling himself to calm down and stop acting like a mouth breather.

"So, um, this is my room..." Mike mumbled as El looked around the space in awe. Her eyes full of wonder as she took in the features of the bedroom.

The room wasn't very big, but there were two twin beds both pushed up against the opposite sides of the wall. One space was quite messy, the bed not made up, candy wrappers on the floor, toys overflowing under the bed and movie posters littering the wall.

The other side had movie posters too, but they looked well looked after. The bed was made and looked warm and inviting with a blue comforter and flannel bedding. There was a little toy on the bedside table and El smiled, walking slowly over to it and picking it up with interest.

"Oh, that's Rory," Mike said from behind her, his hand reached out and El tried to ignore her racing heart as their fingers touched whilst he pushed a small button on the toy. "See he's got a speaker in his

mouth." He added happily whilst the dinosaur roared.

El didn't say anything but just smiled down at the small dinosaur, thinking it was sweet that Mike still had toys and how excited he got over them. He was certainly very different from the likes of Axel.

"You must be freezing," Mike commented, concern etched into his voice. El turned around to face him and looked down at her clothes, cringing when she realised she was dripping water onto the carpet.

"Let me see what I can find that you can change into," Mike said hurrying over to his dresser and rifling through the clothes.

El watched him talking to himself as he sifted through the draws and shook his head at the different options. She smiled, loving how caring he was, how he always seemed to want to help her.

She knew that if Kali found out she had told him their secret, she would be in a lot of trouble. But after Mike had opened up about his friend Will, how could she not tell him her own story. Her brain was still aching from the knowledge of their being someone else out there like her and Kali.

They had always assumed that the others once held by the lab had either escaped or were killed during experiments. It had never occurred to El that there could be more people in the world with powers that had never been captured.

"Here," Mike said happily, handing over a pair of grey sweat pants and a blue sweater. "My mom packed these for me, but I outgrew them years ago. I kept forgetting to get rid of them."

El took the clothes out of his hands, surprised by how soft they felt. They were a far cry from the rough textures she was used to. She looked up at Mike and beamed, "thank you."

He seemed to be taken aback by her reaction, but he smiled sheepishly and shrugged his shoulders, "it's no big deal." He said nonchalantly. "You can change in the bathroom if you want. Oh! Hang on!"

Eleven blinked in surprise as Mike hurried to a door just inside of the

room, revealing a small bathroom. He sighed in relief and turned back to El with pink cheeks, "s-sorry, I just wanted to make sure Dustin had left it in a viewable state."

She couldn't help but laugh, finding his awkwardness incredible endearing. "Thank you Mike," El said softly before passing him in the door way and going into the bathroom.

"Yeah sure, no problem." Mike called. "I'm um, just gonna get changed in here." He said gesturing to his bedroom. El gave him an amused smile, nodding her head in understanding before closing the bathroom door.

"Oh, and there's some fresh towels in the laundry basket if you need one!" Mike's muffled voice came from the other room.

"Okay Mike," El called back, biting her lip to stop herself from giggling. Her stomach was filled to the brim with butterflies, fluttering madly anytime he said something. She sighed quietly, smiling giddily to herself as she peeled off her wet clothes and carefully changed into Mike's.

Normally she wouldn't have been able to cope so well with a small space, but knowing Mike was on the other side of the door was comforting. Having him around made her feel safer than she had ever felt before.

Once El was changed, she looked down at the clothes with a smile and ran the palms of her hands down her stomach. Being in soft sweater was like being engulfed in cotton wool, she felt warm and cosy.

The rain has drenched through her hoodie and her gelled back hair had lost its texture, dripping as wet as if she had just gotten out of the shower. El opened the laundry basket and pulled out a white towel, drying her locks which were rapidly curling into waves.

She smiled to herself remembering the first time she had been able to grow her hair out after leaving the lab. The curls had been tight back then and Axel had nicknamed her Shirley Temple, not that El had understood the reference.

Now the curls had softened with their length, leading to deep waves that landed down just above her shoulder blades. Eleven had got her hair cut once since leaving the lab after her hair had grown so much it tangled easily and was painful to brush. Kali had distracted her anxious mind with images of butterflies whilst Dottie cut her hair just above the length it was at now.

El had grown to love her hair but would frequently have it gelled back by the group to fit in with their image. She took a moment to stare into the bathroom mirror and smiled as she noticed the way the waves looked when they were free of products.

"El?" Mike called anxiously. "Are you done yet? I was thinking of making a hot drink and maybe some food."

El grinned, exhaling a shaky breath of nerves about seeing Mike again. Every time she looked into his deep amber eyes it felt like she would fall straight into them. He was simply *beautiful*.

Instead of answering him, El turned the door knob and walked out of the bathroom. She was faced with Mike, stood slightly away by the dresser and she smiled taking in his new clothes. He was dressed in black sweats and a knitted sweater that was ridiculously cute on him.

He didn't seem to notice her staring though because he was doing a bit of staring himself, more specifically at her hair. El blushed as she watched the way his eyes had widened and how his mouth was slightly open as he took in her wavy locks.

"Pretty," he blurted out to El's delight. She couldn't stop the small pleased smile from quirking up her lips. Mike blinked and choked on his own breath. "Good! Pretty good...um h-hair. I mean curls. I mean..."

He seemed to give up and hid his face in his hands. El burst out laughing because he was just so awkward and dorky, nothing like a Disney prince and yet he was better. So much better.

"Did you say a hot drink? And food?" El asked warmly, hoping to help him out of his embarrassed dilemma.

Mike looked up at her from his hands and sighed in relief, smiling gratefully. "Yes! I'll get right on it. You just stay here." He said quickly, rushing over to the door and throwing her a shy smile over his shoulder that made El want to swoon all over again.

With Mike out of the room she took a moment to properly explore as any normal person would do. Opening his drawers with interest, flicking through his textbooks, frowning at the weird little green creature sat on his desk before staring up at his movie posters.

"Star Wars," El repeated quietly taking in the strange costumes that the characters wore.

"Star Wars is my favourite," came a happy voice. El turned and watched Mike walking back in the room with two hot teas clutched in one hand and a plate full of what looked like waffles in the other.

Mike was spilling tea everywhere and wincing when it hit his hand but out of respect El pretended she didn't notice. "I've never seen Star Wars." She answered simply.

There was a choke behind her and then the waffles slid straight off the plate and landed on Mike's bed. It took El a moment to realise his grip on the plate had loosened in surprise at her statement.

"S-Sorry!" Mike croaked, hastily blowing the thin waffles for any lint and putting them back on the plate haphazardly. "I just...I mean, you haven't seen *Star Wars*? Like *any* of them?!"

"There's more than one?"

"Oh my god." Mike whispered solemnly, sitting down on the edge of his bed as if his legs would no longer be able to keep him up.

El blushed, feeling like this was clearly a big deal to him. She cleared her throat and joined him on the bed. "Well I've seen *other* films," she reasoned in defence.

"Like what?" Mike asked curiously, turning to her and offering her a thin waffle.

She thanked him and took the circular waffle. "Disney films. My

favourites are The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast." El took a bite out of the waffle and chewed it slowly, her senses coming to life as she tasted the waffle and hummed in appreciation. "What *are* these?!"

"Eggos," Mike answered immediately, grinning as he watched her be overcome with love for the thin waffles.

El quickly finished her first Eggo and grabbed another one whilst Mike picked up one himself and played with it for a minute. "I've never seen The Little Mermaid you know. And I haven't seen Beauty and the Beast either. I mean it only came out last year and - ."

"You haven't *seen* them?!" El shouted in exasperation, almost choking on her Eggo.

Mike watched her in surprise for a moment before a playful smirk lit up his face. "And *you* haven't seen Star Wars! The greatest films *ever* made!"

El shook her head trying to hide her teasing smile, "no Disney films are the greatest ever made."

"Nope that would be Star Wars." Mike responded adamantly.

They stared at each other, both of them glaring before Mike chuckled and El giggled, feeling foolish and happier than she probably deserved. They carried on eating and sipped at their hot drinks whilst El tried to decide whether or not to ask a question, a question she knew she shouldn't be asking, but also one she couldn't resist.

"I think we need to end this debate in the only way I know how." El said quietly whilst Mike looked at her with half amusement and half curiosity.

"And how would that be?"

El turned and her breath stuttered when she found herself immediately looking straight into Mike's amber eyes and seeing them staring right back at her. Her heart trembled, and she took a moment to answer, trying to gather herself. "I think I need to watch these Star Wars films, and you need to watch The Little Mermaid and Beauty

and the Beast...*together*."

Mike cleared his throat but didn't break their eye contact. "Like um, like you would come back here, and we could watch movies together?"

El smiled shyly and nodded her head, "if that would be okay?"

"Yeah that would be *amazing*! I-I mean cool, yeah that would be cool...I guess..." Mike stuttered, El's eyes widened with delight at the cute pink splotches on his otherwise pale cheeks.

"Cool," El agreed with a soft smile before looking down at the empty plate whilst Mike gave her a lopsided grin. "And could we have Eggos again?" she added, looking back up at him hopefully.

Mike laughed, and the sound was like a warm blanket enveloping around her shoulders. "Yes of course we can."

They continued to smile at each other, the space between them feeling so slim and the heat radiating off their bodies making El feel dizzy. She averted her eyes to the window and noticed how it had stopped raining finally, but she also couldn't help but realise how late it was.

After watching Mike in the void for most of the day, El had finally decided that enough was enough and she needed to see him. She had lied to the group and told them she was going to explore some leads on Brenner. El knew if she didn't get back soon, the others would worry.

She sighed heavily, looking down at her lap and wanting nothing more than to stay in the warmth with Mike. Just to be in his presence that made her feel so indescribably good.

"I should go," El said quietly, glancing slowly up to meet Mike's eyes.

His shoulders slumped, "really? Because you can *stay* if you want. And um, if you wanna go to sleep or whatever it's cool, I'll just sleep on the floor or – "

"No Mike. I need to go back to Kali and the others, they will worry if

I don't come back." El said quickly, trying to hold back the tears she felt brewing behind her eyes.

"Okay," Mike said solemnly, he worried his lower lip between his teeth for a moment deep in thought. "I can walk you home if you like? It's probably not safe for you to walk alone." He added eagerly.

El couldn't help but grin and shook her head, "I can look after myself if I need to Mike. And...well I wouldn't want you walking back home on your own." *I also don't want you to get mugged again.*

"Well when can I see you again? When can we watch movies and stuff?" He asked quickly, his anxiety so clear to El that she knew she needed to calm him down.

She placed her hand on his shaking leg and he immediately froze. His eyes darting from where her hand was on his knee back to her eyes. "How about next weekend? I'll contact you nearer the time to make sure that everything is okay."

Mike's smile at her confirmation of a potential day for them to watch movies haltered with her second comment. "How will you contact me? Do you have a phone? I can give you my number..."

El grinned and moved her hand away from his knee, to tap gently against his temple. "I have my ways. You just have to trust me." She teased, already planning how she could contact him from the void. She had never tried speaking to him there before, but desperate times called for desperate measures and El didn't think she would be able to survive a week without seeing him.

Mike smiled sheepishly, his eyes softened as he stared into her own and she felt her heart try and leap straight out of her chest. "I do trust you." He whispered.

El gulped, suddenly realising they were closer than ever. Their legs touching, hands inches apart and their faces close enough to feel the warmth of each other's breath. Her skin felt hypersensitive and dry, like it was taking everything to contain herself.

She saw Mike's dark amber eyes flicker down to her lips before

focusing back on her wide hazel orbs. El felt the breath catch in her throat as she realised what he wanted, what *she* wanted.

But just as she pulled slightly closer, their finger tips touching as they met on the bed, El suddenly pulled away and cleared her throat, looking down at the carpet.

"I need to go. I'll contact you soon okay?" She said quickly, feeling a flush of embarrassment creeping up onto her cheeks, making even her neck feel red hot.

"Y-Yeah," Mike croaked coughing as he stood up from the bed too and put his hands into the pockets of his sweat pants, leaning back and forth on his long legs.

El gave him a shy smile and gathered her wet clothes, folding them to distract herself as she moved closer to Mike's door, whilst he walked slowly behind her.

She wanted to kick herself for moving away from him on the bed, but the fear of potentially having her first kiss got to her. In all of the Disney films the first kiss was this big event, usually signifying the end of an amazing movie. But that wasn't what bothered El and stopped her. It was the fear that she would be a terrible kisser. She was going to be 21 this year and she had *zero* experience when it came to kissing. Mike was handsome, sweet and the cutest boy she had *ever* met, so surely, he had kissed a lot of girls and El just knew she would fail in comparison.

She reached for the door handle, turning back to Mike to thank him for his hospitality, but she halted when she saw how conflicted he looked.

There was a deep frown bringing down his brow, his skin looked pale and his eyes sad and worried. "Just...be careful alright?" he said tenderly.

El felt a warm smile lift her features as she opened the door and looked at him, her chest heaving a breath mixed with sadness at her departure but also hope for the next time she would see him.

She thought about his question and couldn't help but smile softly in response, "*promise.*"

AN: Poor El's thinking that our sweet heartbreaker Mike has kissed loads of girls...LOL

So we're into Chapter 4! Please let me know what you thought, your feedback is very important to me. Lots of love! :-)

5. Voids and Videos

Part of Your World

Chapter 5: Voids and Videos

Thursday 23rd January 1992

"Look at me Eleven."

She was back in the lab again, a cold sweat running slowly down her spine as she felt the presence of the man who scared her most in the world stood in front of her. His cold hands were reaching for the black hood that obscured her face whilst she tried to throw herself away from his grasp.

"No! Please go away!"

"Don't you want to look at your papa Eleven?"

"NO!" Eleven sobbed thrashing against the material that was slowly being lifted from her face. "No! Mike! Mike help me!" she screamed in fear.

"Eleven! Wake up!"

El was brought back into consciousness so abruptly that she flung herself up into a sitting position, almost colliding with Kali who had been insistently nudging her.

The young woman gasped for breath, hot tears prickling at her eyes as she collapsed into Kali's embrace, sobbing all over again from the trauma of her reoccurring nightmare. She shook and cried as her sister held her and waited for her to eventually calm down enough to speak.

"I-It was h-him again. But t-this time he almost g-got the mask off my face." El trembled as she confessed to Kali about her nightmare. It was usually always the same, but this time it felt like Brenner had gotten closer to controlling her own dream, bending her will to extend her suffering.

Kali was silent for a while, her brow creased in frustration as she rubbed El's back. "And have you tried finding him again? In the void?" she finally asked, the question too important for her to worry about the affect it might have on her sister.

El flinched, a wave of guilt routing deeply into her stomach. She hadn't looked for Brenner in a long time, feeling too scared of what she would find or see if she located him. She knew that everything her and Kali were doing was to bring down the people to blame for what had happened in the labs. She knew the importance of finding Brenner, but her trauma always won out.

"He...he still has a wall up against me..." El mumbled looking down at Kali's shoulder, unable to meet her eye. In the earlier days, before the nightmares had really started to take shape, El had attempted to look for Brenner in the void, only to find a blockage. And whilst the gang believed the blockage was some kind of scientific brick wall, El knew the obstacle was down to her.

Kali exhaled deeply and stared at the opposite wall, her expression troubled. "We have to find a way to break down that wall. It is the only way."

El nodded slowly, feeling numb and disorientated. The frequency in which the nightmare took place seemed to be increasing and she found herself dreading falling asleep each night.

"Who is Mike?"

The question from Kali was so abrupt that El jumped slightly, her whole body freezing.

"W-What?" she croaked, unsure and uneasy as to why the wonderful Michael Wheeler was being brought up and how Kali even *knew* about him. El thought she had been so careful.

"When you were thrashing in your sleep, you were shouting for Mike." Kali explained, her voice emotionless. "So, I wanted to know who *Mike* is."

El gulped and shook her head, "I...I don't know a Mike. I don't know

why I would have said that name." She mumbled feeling another hit of guilt like a blow to the stomach.

Both women were silent for some time until Kali stood up from the bed and asked quietly, "will you be going out on your own again today?"

El once more averted her eyes, already feeling the suspicion from her sister burrowed in her gaze. "Not today," she admitted playing with a stray thread on her comforter.

"Good, because I need to talk to you about something."

El looked back up at Kali, her heart in her throat as she immediately thought about Mike and whether her sister and the gang had figured out where she snuck off to last weekend under the pretence of doing research into the lab. Thankfully they had all been asleep or too intoxicated when she got home to find the fact that she was wearing a blue sweater and grey sweat pants strange.

Kali grabbed the old rickety desk chair, dragging it closer to El and sitting down facing her, almost looking to the young panicked woman like she was about to be interrogated. Her hands started to tremble, and she wrung them together to stop the shaking.

"I think we are being followed." Kali stated solemnly, making El blink in surprise and then frown in concern.

"And do you think it's...*him*?" El croaked out.

Kali sighed and rubbed a hand over her tired face. "I'm not sure. I don't *think* so."

"When did this happen?" El asked quietly, her eyes searching Kali's for understanding of what or *who* they could be facing.

"Last night, when me and Funshine were doing that job on 63rd street." Kali began whilst El nodded, not needing the specifics of the illegal jobs that the group did with other gangs to maintain their survival. "Everything went fine with the actual job, we were heading back, and I could feel it...someone's presence..."

El gulped slowly, her eyes widened with worry at the thought of what could have happened if this person had caught Kali and Funshine. She didn't want to lose either of them. She *couldn't*.

"I looked and couldn't see anyone, but I know someone was watching us Eleven. I *felt* it."

"I believe you," El whispered seriously, her eyes locking with her sister, sharing a look that only *they* could share. It was the fear of the lab, that underlying rotting pain that crawled within both of them. It was the same pain that caused the nightmares and the trauma.

But what blazed even more powerfully was the fight that was burning inside, to never give in to the lab, to *never* be a prisoner again.

"We will be careful." El said strongly, her hand reaching for Kali's and squeezing it firmly in support. "We will never go back there."

Kali squeezed her hand back and nodded her head, her jaw tight. "Never." She whispered.

El spent the rest of the day reminding herself why she couldn't have a normal life, why it was too dangerous to be around Mike, to involve him in all of this.

She tried to distract her mind by going over plans for the labs that the group were already aware of belonging to the Department of Energy. The blue prints were spread across the table whilst the group all stood around, muttering and discussing which labs would still be in partnership with Brenner.

By the time night fell, El lay on her bed, staring up at the ceiling and wondered whether Mike missed her just as much as she missed him. She sighed, fretting her lower lip against her teeth as she realised how a week had almost gone by without her seeing him.

Almost a week without his clumsy behaviour, almost a week without his handsome face and beautiful smile, almost a week without the thrill of his laughter and his calming voice.

Almost a week of pure torture.

El groaned and turned on her side, her hand shoving underneath the pillow case and pulling out the soft blue sweater that she had hidden there last Sunday. She told herself every night to just leave the poor article of clothing alone, but yet again El found herself sniffing it deeply, inhaling Mike's scent and burying her face into it as she tried to sleep.

Having his scent around was cruelty to her heart but having the scent start to fade was *much* worse.

El knew she shouldn't see him, *especially* if someone was potentially tracking them. It was dangerous and went against every rule that Kali had set.

But for him, El would break any rule.

"Are you *sure* you didn't make her up?" Dustin asked calmly before being promptly smacked in the face with the pillow Mike had just hurled at him.

"No asshole I didn't make her up!" Mike scolded, his eyes narrowed into slits before he sighed with frustration and threw his head back against the pillow he was trying to smother himself with.

Dustin simply shrugged and turned the page of his X-Men comic. "Well ask her out on a date then if she's real. Tell her 'El, baby, you're the finest superhero kickass girl I've ever met. How about you and I go explore some galaxies together – *hey!* Stop throwing pillows at me!"

"Well stop making ridiculous suggestions then!" Mike shot back, sitting up and shuffling until his back was against the headboard. "Besides, I don't have her phone number. She just...well she told me she had ways of contacting me and that I should trust her..." He mumbled out feeling defeated and sullen.

"And *do* you trust her?" Dustin asked looking up from his comic book again.

Mike stared ahead, his eyes glazed over slightly as he thought about

her. How last Sunday she had been sat on his bed with him and they had shared Eggos and teased each other over their favourite movies. "Yeah I do trust her. I just...*miss* her you know?"

"Oh, I know," Dustin snorted chucking the comic onto his bedside table. "You seriously talk about her all the time."

"No I don't." Mike mumbled whilst his cheeks reddened. He mimicked Dustin and got ready for bed, throwing back his duvet and wriggling down against the mattress until he was comfy.

"Mike," Dustin stated, turning on his side so he could look at his best friend. "I think your vocabulary solely consists of 'I wonder what El is doing', 'I miss El' and 'El has the most beautiful eyes'. We get it *okay*? You're in love."

Mike huffed and glared at Dustin for a moment, not wanting to admit all the truths in his words. "Just...turn the light off please." He said quietly before turning over to stare at the wall.

There was the sound of movement and then the flicking of the lamp as the room fell into darkness. "Night buddy," Dustin yawned before shuffling around under his sheets.

"Night Dustin." Mike mumbled, closing his eyes and praying that sleep would come...

He was twelve years old and riding his bike along the main stretch of Hawkins, smiling like an idiot whilst a soft giggling voice reached his ears. Mike felt the comfort of arms wrapping around his stomach and he grinned as he continued to bike, speeding up on the pedals to make her laugh even more. It was perfect, it was –

Mike blinked and blinked again, trying to get his eyes to focus on the light when he realised there wasn't any. He was in a large black space, how long it went on for he couldn't say. He looked down and realised he was in his bed still, but he just *knew* he wasn't dreaming.

"It takes a while to get used to it."

The gentle voice that spoke made Mike jump so violently that he fell off the side of the bed in a tangle of sheets and landed onto the floor.

He immediately noticed the ground had a sheen of shallow water and yet he didn't feel wet.

Mike frowned looking down at his wrapped-up body before his eyes snapped up to the young woman who was sat on the edge of his bed, her legs swinging back and forward as she watched him with a playful smile.

"El!" Mike choked, his heart immediately pounding in his chest and his palms becoming sweaty as he tried to extract himself from the knotted sheets.

"Hi Mike," El said softly, her amusement hidden terribly behind her smirk.

"Where...um where are we?" Mike asked nervously, his eyes flicking around the dark space before turning back to the girl who was taking up all of his thoughts.

"This is the void," El explained calmly, her eyes not leaving Mike as she appraised him with a soft smile. "At least that is what I call it. I come here to...to find people."

"Oh," Mike croaked, his voice higher pitched than he would have liked. He looked down at his sheets, feeling like an idiot and once again tried to free himself. El just giggled, the sound warming every part of his body as she waved her hand causing the sheets to untangle.

Mike gasped in shock, he thought he would have been used to her powers by now, but he still felt himself being in awe, especially of her.

"Sorry I'm such a mouthbreather," he chuckled anxiously before heaving himself back onto the bed.

"A mouthbreather?" El questioned in confusion whilst Mike unconsciously moved a little closer to her.

"Yeah a dumb person, a knuckle head." He said running a hand through his messy dark locks.

El's eyes watched his hand and she swallowed slowly. "Oh." Her answer didn't exactly inform Mike whether or not she understood the term, but he found himself starting to relax when he realised that this place had to be safe if she was there with him.

"So...um, why did you bring me here?" He asked nervously, his attention focused on El. She looked so beautiful with her brunette locks natural and wavy as they fell down her shoulders and her hazel eyes bright with attentiveness.

She smiled gently, "I missed you."

Mike's heart almost burst straight out of his chest at her words. She *missed* him? *El* missed *him*?! Mike Wheeler? *Holy shit*.

"I-I missed you too," he admitted giving her a sheepish smile. "A lot. Like so much...." He wanted to kick himself for the added detail, knowing she had already gotten the point without his running mouth. Thankfully El just grinned with what looked like warmth.

"I have never brought anyone into the void before," El explained making Mike immediately feel special, he tried and failed to contain his ecstatic smile. "But I wanted to speak to you, so I came to you in the void and focused on what I wanted to do...and here you are."

"Why did, um you want to speak with me?" Mike asked quietly, nerves slowly creeping up his throat and threatening to take his voice away.

"To plan when we're going to have our movie marathon of course." El chuckled, her warm laughter making Mike grin even though he was kind of disappointed that she hadn't brought him into the void to confess her undying love for him.

"Well can you come over tomorrow?" Mike asked eagerly, desperate to see her in real life.

El's smile faltered for a moment and she pursed her lips in thought. They were both quiet for some time, Mike not daring to talk whilst she considered his question.

"Yes." She said simply, surprising him that such a short answer could

have taken so long to come up with. El didn't need to express her worries about it being dangerous for Mike to know that was what riddled her mind. He chose not to bring it up, hoping that if he didn't mention the consequences than it wouldn't worry her either.

"That's awesome," Mike said breathlessly, unable to stop himself from grinning foolishly as he realised he got to spend a day with her, *tomorrow* to be exact. His mind was already making up excuses to get Dustin out of the dorm, so they could be alone and not endure his teasing.

"So, I've got the Star Wars films...obviously," Mike said chuckling, feeling lighter and happier than he had all week. "Will you bring *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*?"

"Of course," El said grinning with excitement. "And we will finally be able to see who has the best taste in movies." She added with a teasing smile that melted Mike on the spot. His heart was racing, and he was struggling to catch his breath.

"Yeah, you'll get to see me win," Mike goaded back, flashing his white teeth in a smug smile.

"That is *not* going to happen." El laughed making Mike want to sing and dance because *he* was making her react like this.

As they joked and teased Mike remembered something else he had wanted to mention to her, knowing that it was a long shot, but now she was here and smiling and laughing, he felt like it was a better time than ever.

"El?" he asked nervously.

"Yes?"

"Um...it's my birthday on Sunday and...well I kind of have this tradition of having a sleepover with my friends the night before. We're all getting together at Will's house...and I was *hoping*...well I was wondering if you might want to like...come too." Mike's voice trailed off in a shake of anxiety, knowing he was pushing the boundaries of the new friendship he had formed with her. And

knowing it would also expose her to new people, and whilst he trusted them with his life, it would be understandable if El didn't.

"Will?" she repeated, frowning slightly. "Your friend who also has powers?"

"Yes." Mike said nodding quickly, ignoring how wide his eyes were at the fact that she hadn't shot down the idea just yet. "He would be there, and my three other best friends. Oh, and Will's mom. But she is the nicest and kindest woman you'll ever meet, and if you did *want* to mention about your um powers...then you wouldn't find anyone more understanding than her."

El pondered all of the new information and frowned, sighing slightly. "I want to Mike...but Kali and the others...I don't think they would allow it..."

"But do you *have* to ask their permission?" Mike blurted out before feeling scared he had overstepped a boundary when El shifted uncomfortably next to him. "I'm sorry, it's just...well you deserve to be able to have a life El and if you want to come, I know it will be fun and my friends will *love* you." He persisted, smiling gently and patting himself on the back mentally for not explaining how much *he* loved her already.

El bit her lip, distracting Mike's eyes for a moment while she battled with her internal worries about the situation he had put her in. He waited patiently, knowing this would be a big step for her and tried to prepare himself for her to decline the offer, even though it really was the only thing he wanted for his birthday.

"I will go...to the sleepover. Maybe I won't sleep over with you all, but I would like to come and meet your friends." El said gently, her smile raising quickly with enjoyment when she realised how happy her answer had made Mike.

"You're *serious*?" he asked breathlessly, his pulse quickening as he stared at her, his eyes as wide as saucers.

El giggled and nodded her head, "yes you mouthbreather!"

Mike grinned and without even thinking about it he hugged her, completely embraced her into a tight hold. El froze for a moment before her body seemed to soften and she wrapped her arms around his waist. He smiled against her shoulder, secretly inhaling her scent deeply, filling his lungs with her and wanting the feel of her body against his to never go away.

Mike grinned like a fool and squeezed her even tighter until she croaked, "Mike I can't breathe."

"Oh shit, sorry!" He cringed immediately pulling away so El could gasp and inhale air into her squished lungs.

When she was breathing calmly again she gave him a coy smile that immediately lifted Mike's spirit from remorse to delight. "Don't be sorry," she told him tenderly. "I liked it."

"O-Oh," Mike croaked out, trying desperately to clear his dry throat. "Um...m-maybe I can hug you again sometime..."

"Maybe..." El grinned back, her eyes bright and playful as her gaze danced over Mike's red face.

They finished their time in the void with another hug, this one more gently on Mike's part and more consuming from El. He grinned against her hair, closing his eyes and knowing he would be seeing her tomorrow and then on Saturday, already thinking of ways in which he could convince her to stay for the sleepover.

But for now, he would take all he could get, and that was a warm and heart pounding embrace with the kickass superhero woman he had fallen in love with.

Friday 24th January 1992

El was in high spirits when she woke up early on Friday morning, a smile already plastered on her face following her time in the void with Mike.

She couldn't quite believe she had managed to pull him into the dark space but was thankful that she had been able to concentrate enough

to bring him to her, because their time together had been magical.

Seeing his sweet face and his dorky ways had sent El's heart into a spin and she knew it would take a lot to wipe the smile off of her face. She woke up not only with the realisation that she would be seeing Mike later on that day, but also with the surprise knowledge that she hadn't experienced a nightmare.

El set about getting ready to go to the video store which was one of her regular spots. She tied her brunette curls into a bun and then carefully pulled on her blonde wig. El changed into black jeans and a long black hoodie, pulling the hood up over the wig and feeling like she was as hidden as she could be.

"Where are you going?" Kali asked lazily from the couch where she was reading through files on the lab with Mick.

"To the video store and then I'm going to do some research." El shrugged, her hands in the pockets of the hoodie to keep herself warm.

Kali frowned sceptically but nodded all the same, "be careful Eleven." She told her wisely, her dark eyebrow raising slightly in suspicion.

"I will," El said waving her off as casually as she could manage before disappearing out of the warehouse and taking in a deep breath to calm her nerves. She wasn't lying about the video store, but the research wasn't *exactly* true.

El walked for a good twenty minutes, shivering slightly from the cold as she kept her eyes on the road, her gaze flickering now and again to decipher any threats. It was ten minutes before she reached the video store when she felt an odd feeling down her back. It was like a shiver along her spine and it was a feeling of being *hunted*.

El froze and whirled around, frowning and squinting as she tried to find anyone out of place. But this was Chicago and it was bustling with people. All sorts of people, from officer workers walking into her without caring as they hurried to meetings, to drug dealers sneaking into the alleyways, to police officers sipping coffee and mumbling to one another. There were people *everywhere*.

She exhaled and tried to ease her own worries, picking up her pace as she headed down the street and reached the video store with a sigh of relief.

It was a quiet and small store, with not a lot of content. Not that El minded of course, the place always had her favourites and that was all she cared about. Her finger ran across the shelf with practised ease until she reached the videos of her choice, the ones she would be convincing Mike to love.

El smiled to herself thinking of the handsome nerd and had to hold back a whimper at how incredible it had felt to be held by him. She had melted immediately into his embrace and wished she could have stayed like that forever despite how tightly he had first squeezed her.

She picked up Beauty and the Beast and The Little Mermaid from the exact same spot as usual and headed over to the counter where the red head sales assistant sat bored on a stool with her chin in her palm. She was watching El as she approached her.

"Just these please," El mumbled nervously as the blue eyes of the girl x-rayed her before focusing on the Disney videos.

"You come here a lot," the red head commented, leaning back slightly to look at El who was averting her own gaze to the floor.

"I like to rent these videos," El answered sheepishly, slowly lifting her focus onto the blue eyes. They weren't exactly intimidating but it was still strange for her to have someone considering her the way this girl was.

The red head snorted and smiled, "yeah I know you do." She said gesturing towards the videos. "I think you are our most frequent customer."

El nodded, not really sure what to say whilst the red head sat up and reached out her hand. "I'm Max by the way, the bitchy store assistant that I'm sure you're used to by now." She grinned making El smile at her abruptness.

"I'm...El," she replied, feeling her heart flutter at using the name that

Mike had given her. She hesitantly placed her hand in Max's and let the red head shake their joined grasp.

"So, El," Max said sitting back again. "Why Beauty and the Beast and The Little Mermaid?"

El couldn't help but smile but shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. "They are my favourite movies."

"Hmm," Max said looking down at the videos before smirking as she looked back up at El who was watching the red head curiously. "Keep them. You rent them all the time, they may as well be yours anyway."

El blinked in confusion and reached for her pocket where she had stashed some cash. "Okay...you want money for them?" she asked.

"No!" Max chuckled shaking her head. "I want you to have them. Honestly no one else rents them but you."

"Isn't it stealing?" El mumbled quietly, averting her eyes guiltily when she realised the amount of stealing she had done over the past three years.

Max shrugged, a stern look on her face. "I don't call it stealing if I'm saying you can have them." She said casually. "Plus, my stepdad owns this joint and he's a *dick*. Any chance I get to defy him then I fucking do it."

El didn't know whether to frown when Max mentioned her stepdad or to smile at the fact that she was going to get to keep her favourite movies. She grabbed them, holding them to her chest and grinned at the red head.

"Thank you," El said sincerely whilst Max waved her hand nonchalantly and smiled smugly. "Is there anything I can do for you in return?"

Max squinted in thought, her blue eyes wandering around the store for a moment before she slowly grinned and hopped off the stool. "Yeah, come and grab a coffee with me."

AN: Is El about to get her first female friend? Will Max realise that El is head over heels in love with Mike Wheeler her nerdy friend? Does Kali know what is going on? And who is following the group?!

I'm sorry this took so long to get to you all. I had an operation earlier in the week and I'm still recovering, but I felt so guilty not having given you all a chapter in so long! So that is why it's on the short side for my liking.

But I am sure I can make it up to you in the next chapter. You all like fluff right? ;-)

6. Disney v George Lucas

Part of Your World

AN: Hi all! I just want to thank you all for reading the story so far and especially to those who have favourited, followed and left a review. It means the world to me!

I hope you enjoy this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it. :-)

Chapter 6: Disney vs George Lucas

Friday 24th January 1992

"So, how long have you lived in Chicago for?" Max asked El, both girls were walking closely together to ease off the bitter cold whilst clutching onto their coffee take out cups.

El felt the usual anxiety roll over her like a wave at being asked a personal question. It had been embedded into her to not share any information that could be seen as a risk to the gang, but for some reason El trusted Max.

It wasn't just because she had gifted her with her two favourite films, it was more a feeling that El got with Max. She had a genuine and practical attitude that immediately drew El in.

She kept her eyes on the lagoon that they were currently walking around at the Washington Park. The water was dark and slushy, only a few more temperature drops away from freezing over.

"I live with my sister...and friends." El said, cringing only slightly when she said the last word. She wouldn't necessarily have called the gang *friends*, but they were much more than acquaintances.

"That's cool," Max replied casually as the girls sat down at a bench. She sipped her coffee for a moment and smiled against the rim. "I don't know if I could live with my friends, they're such nerds. Even if one of them is my boyfriend."

El's interest was immediately peaked and she turned to Max, her eyes curious. "You have a boyfriend?"

Max nodded and chuckled, "yep, Lucas. He's not the *biggest* nerd in the group I guess. And what he lacks in coolness he makes up in body," she teased, winking and nudging El in the shoulder whilst the brunette smiled pretending to know what Max meant.

"Do you have a boyfriend? Or a girlfriend?" Max asked interestedly whilst she rested her shoulders against the back of the bench.

"No," El answered honestly shaking her head. Her mind immediately flashed with images of Mike and she blushed. "But I do like this one guy..." She added shyly, looking down at her coffee cup in her lap, playing absentmindedly with the lid.

"Ooh tell me more," Max said playfully as she took another sip of her hot drink.

El sighed in relief, the idea of *finally* being able to talk about Mike flooding her senses. And before she knew it, she couldn't stop. "He is the sweetest man I've ever met. He's really clumsy and cute, funny, kind and so handsome." El practically swooned, her smile was wide and bright, and her eyes turned dreamy as she thought about the black mop of hair, the dark starry eyes and the very kissable lips.

"Why don't you ask him out." Max said grinning, "it's obvious you're crazy about him."

El's cheeks burned and she looked out at the water, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. "What if he doesn't feel the same way? What if he just wants to be my friend?"

Max hummed for a moment clearly deep in thought before she finally spoke. "Well, has he ever given you any signs that he wants to be just friends? Or has he tried to make a move on you?"

"A move on me?" El asked confused, her brow lowering as she tried to understand the concept.

Max shrugged casually, "yeah you know, like has he tried to kiss you or something?"

El immediately remembered being sat on Mike's bed and how intimate everything had seemed when he started to lean in to her before she pulled away. She sighed heavily, "I think he might have wanted to kiss me. But I...I stopped it." She dipped her head in shame.

Max laughed in surprise, "why did you move away if he was going to kiss you? You obviously really like him."

El blushed, looking down at her lap. Her words were so weak that she was surprised if Max could even hear her. "I've never kissed anyone before."

There was a silence between the girls for a moment. Everything was so quiet that El could hear the rush of wings flapping in the distance as a bird took off from one of the high trees.

"How old are you?" Max asked curiously, surprising El who had assumed she would immediately laugh at her lack of experience.

"I'm twenty." El answered feebly, embarrassment starting to creep up her neck. She knew from her magazines that it wasn't exactly average for a twenty year old to never have kissed someone before, but it wasn't like she had the chance over the years.

Between living in the lab and life on the run, her prospects of finding the right person had been slim to none. It felt more like fate than anything else how she had found Mike that night in the park. He really was the only person she thought she would ever want to kiss.

"And the reason you haven't kissed anyone, are you like religious or something?" Max asked in confusion. "Like does it go against your beliefs? I just have a hard time believing someone as pretty as you have struggled to find someone they want to kiss."

El smiled slightly at being called pretty, even if she would prefer it coming out of Mike's mouth instead. Her grin widened for a second when she remembered his reaction to her natural hair and his compliment.

She realised Max was still looking at her expectantly so El quickly

came out of her daze over Mike, coughing awkwardly but answering honestly. "I wasn't exactly around a lot of boys growing up and I haven't found anyone I wanted to kiss until now."

Max nodded in understanding and frowned in thought, "so, you were scared you wouldn't be any good at kissing? Is that why you pulled back?"

El felt some of the tension in her shoulders leaving her body immediately. It was incredibly refreshing to find someone who understood her insecurities and instead of using them against her, Max seemed to genuinely want to help her overcome them.

"It's just he's so beautiful that I am sure he has kissed a lot of girls before and I don't want to disappoint him." El admitted before her eyes went down to the bag that held her favourite movies. "Every kiss in the Disney films are romantic and perfect. Isn't that what kissing is meant to be like?"

Max chuckled and rolled her eyes in amusement. She patted El's arm sympathetically, "listen El, Disney films are great and all, but they are *not* realistic okay? You don't have to be a damsel in distress, you don't *need* to wait for the guy to make the first move and trust me, not *every* kiss is perfect."

El contemplated all of this for the first time, nodding her head slowly as she realised that maybe her idea of love and kissing wasn't from the most reliable of sources. She turned to look at Max and realised there was so much she could learn from this interesting red head.

"Why is every kiss not perfect?" El asked curiously. Gone was her embarrassment, she knew Max wouldn't judge her naive questions.

"Okay so the first time I French kissed it was gross." Max said shuddering before quickly asking, "do you know what I mean by French kissing?"

El furrowed her brow in thought for a moment as she remembered an article in one of her magazines. "Is that, um, with tongues?"

"Yes." Max nodded, smiling rather proudly at El for knowing this.

"Okay so I was thirteen, which yeah might have been a little young to figure out French kissing. My ex-boyfriend Rob was saying goodbye to me after a date and I went in for a normal kiss and the next thing I know he's sticking his tongue in my mouth. It was fucking gross, all slimy and wet. I broke up with him a week after that shit."

El stared at Max in shock, her mouth gaped open in surprise at the revelation. She had never imagined it could be *gross*, especially not with Mike. Her cheeks blushed pink at the thought of kissing him with her tongue. Oddly enough the thought of their tongues stroking in a passionate kiss didn't make her feel gross, in fact it made her feel warm.

"But you must have had good kisses too?" El practically begged, desperate to hear that kissing wasn't always repulsive.

"Absolutely," Max grinned eagerly, before pulling her legs up onto the bench and crossing them under her body. "So, me and Lucas started dating about six months after I broke up with Rob and his kisses were amazing. Because what you need to know El is that it isn't always about the physical touching of mouth to mouth, it's the feeling you get, you know?"

El nodded, smiling slightly at how bright Max got when she spoke about her boyfriend. She clearly had a softer side that was exclusive to Lucas, but it was nice to see the emotions that she felt for him displayed over her face.

"With Lucas everything felt good and it made me want to try things with him. So, when we eventually French kissed it was amazing and intimate." Max said happily before grinning at El, "and I'm sure you will feel the same with your guy, but the only way you are going to know is if you try."

El sighed slightly, her eyes flicking back to the water. "I do want to try, I really do. But what do I do? Do I just press my lips to his? Or should we French kiss?"

Max snorted in amusement and shook her head, "I wouldn't recommend going straight in for the kill right away. Just you know, kiss him like this..."

El watched as Max moved her own fist up to her mouth and softly pressed her lips to it in example. El giggled in surprise and copied the action with her own fist and lips in practise.

Max grinned and suddenly El was filled with a sense of friendship and fun, but also a hint of sadness over the life she had missed so far. This is the kind of thing she should have always been able to do. It was taken away from her by the lab, and that was why Kali was right, they *had* to make the bad men pay for their crimes. They had to get their revenge.

"So, when are you seeing him next?" Max suddenly asked excitedly, breaking El out of her reverie over the lab and the darkness of her past.

She blinked and the unsettled wound inside of her slunk back into the blackness, allowing her to breathe some light into her body for a moment. "In about four hours." El answered with a wide grin. Her excitement was palpable, the idea of seeing Mike again was making her giddy.

Max smiled too, El's enthusiasm was contagious. She slapped her palms against her thighs in a business-like manner and grinned. "Right, well let's go get you ready then! And maybe we can buy you a different outfit..."

El frowned and looked down at her black hoodie and black jeans. "What's wrong with my clothes?" she asked in confusion.

"Nothing's *wrong*," Max reasoned with a shrug. "But I've known you for like two hours and I can already tell this isn't your style." She answered pointing to the black on black combination. Her blue eyes went to El's blonde hair and she smirked, "oh and the wig doesn't suit you."

El's eyes widened in panic, her hand instinctively touching the wig. "H-How did you know it was a wig?" she gulped anxiously.

Max grinned and stood up from the bench, collecting their coffee cups and chucking them in the trash can. "Because I'm not stupid El and it's a shit wig let's be honest."

El giggled out of astonishment at Max's honestly and frank words. She allowed the red head to pull her up from the bench and didn't even flinch when they linked arms.

"Come on Cinderella," Max teased. "Let's go get you ready for your ball."

Mike was nervous. In fact, he didn't think he had ever been this nervous in his entire life. Sure, it wasn't a *date*, but it was still a movie marathon with the most beautiful and amazing girl in the world. Just the two of them all afternoon and evening. *Oh shit, maybe it is a date.*

He was just glad Dustin wasn't here to see his turmoil. He had got his best friend out of the dorm by telling him he needed the peace and quiet to study and practise his presentation. Dustin hadn't minded saying he would go over to Lucas's.

Mike groaned in exasperation as he rifled through his shirts, desperate to find the one that said *'hey, I'm Mike, the nerd you saved. But don't I look dashing in this shirt?'* Yeah it didn't exist.

He just wanted to look good. Well *more* than good. He wanted to look like El's fantasy of a dream man. Mike ran his hand through his wild hair, frowning in thought. *Shit, should I have hired a Disney prince costume or something?*

Huffing in frustration Mike shook his head in dismay at his thoughts before continuing to look for a suitable shirt. He settled on a plain white t-shirt to go with his black jeans before shaking his head and chucking it off, replacing it was a blue button-down shirt, then a yellow sweater, then a grey sweater before practically screaming in annoyance before going back to the original white t-shirt. He pulled on a dark blue lumberjack shirt to cover his arms and then sighed, hoping he looked casual but not like a slob.

Mike tried in vain to control his hair, but it practically gave him the birdy, not moving an inch out of its messy place. He looked down at his digital watch and exhaled a shaky breath. *Ten minutes to go.*

He quickly chucked all of the shirts littering his bedroom floor into the closet and closed it, hiding the mess he had made. Mike's eyes then went onto Dustin's side of the room and he sighed in annoyance at the clutter. He quickly made up Dustin's bed haphazardly, before neatening up some of the comics and kicking the random toys under the bed. At least it looked a bit more inhabitable now.

Mike's dark amber eyes found his watch again, "five minutes to go..." he muttered to himself as a sweat start to develop at the back of his neck. He began to pace the room, wringing out his shaking hands. Was it normal to be this nervous?

Mike wasn't nervous about the movies, he was positive El would like the Star Wars saga and he was sure he would be able to at least *tolerate* the Disney films. No, he was scared about the fact that the girl, who he was pretty positive at this point was the love of his life, would be alone with him in his room.

He knew they wouldn't do *that*. But it was the thought of just getting to touch El's hand that was setting Mike into a turmoil of nerves and anxiety. He could imagine the movie starting and he didn't know whether he should *ask* to hold her hand, was that too desperate? Or should he just be spontaneous and take her hand in his, or was that too pushy?

Mike groaned and yanked at his hair, wondering why on earth he had been made into such a socially awkward wastoid.

There was a gentle knock at the door and Mike almost tripped over his own feet due to how suddenly he came to a stop, his whole body frozen for a moment. His wide eyes staring at the door in almost fear. This was all new territory and he was scared shitless.

Mike gulped slowly and found just enough bravery to walk to the door, albeit stumbling rather than walking. His shaking hand grasped onto the door handle and he took one more deep breath before opening the door to see El standing there smiling.

His heart immediately jumped into his throat when he saw her, a weird squeak escaping his mouth from how squished his chest suddenly felt. El always looked beautiful, from the first moment Mike

had seen her he was captivated. But right now, she looked...wow.

She was in a fitted cream sweater tucked into a pleated and chequered pink and white skirt that fell above her knees. Mike practically choked on his own breath, trying not to look at how much the outfit showed off her curves or how he was seeing her smooth legs for the first time.

She had accompanied the outfit with white converse trainers and a denim jacket. Her hair, god her *hair*, was in loose waves flowing down to her shoulder blades and she just looked completely beautiful, angelic and damnit sexy.

"Mike are you okay?" El asked, taking his silence, which he didn't realise had spanned over two minutes as a sign that something was wrong.

Mike quickly blinked at the sound of El's voice, her soft and concerning tone awaking him from his daze. "Y-Yeah," he croaked, nodding his head for good measure. "I'm fine...it's just...y-you...um, you look beautiful." He explained anxiously before realising what he said. "N-Not that you don't *always* look beautiful! Because you do. I just...you look...um – "

"Thank you, Mike," El chuckled, her eyes warm and playful as she interrupted his stumbling words. Her gaze fell onto his outfit and her smile widened, "you look beautiful too." She concluded before walking past him into the room and leaving him spluttering and red faced.

Mike eventually closed the door and found that El was already sitting on his bed, a grin on her face as she extracted two VHS tapes from the bag that he hadn't even noticed she was carrying. His eyes had solely been on her and even now he was having a very difficult time looking anywhere else.

"What should we watch first?" El asked brightly as her eyes went to the Star Wars videos that Mike had already lined up next to the VCR.

"Um," Mike said intelligently, trying to swallow his nerves as he continued to stare at her. "Can we start with Star Wars?"

"Yes sure," El said scooting further up the bed so that her back was against the wall. Mike had wanted to put the Star Wars films on first purely because he didn't think he would be able to concentrate during them. His point was proven when he noticed that El's scooting had caused her skirt to ride up slightly onto her thighs. Mike stifled his groan and immediately made himself busy with putting '*A New Hope*' into the VCR.

"Do you want some Eggos now?" Mike called to El as he paused the video just before the opening credits.

"Yes please," El answered excitedly. Mike turned to smile at her, her enthusiasm for the toaster waffles filled his chest with warmth. How could she be so beautiful, sexy and cute all at the same time?!

Mike made himself busy with the Eggos, inhaling and exhaling calming breaths in the kitchen as he leaned against the counter and waited for the toaster to pop up the waffles. He was slowly getting over his initial shock of seeing El and hoped he would just be able to enjoy watching his favourite movies with her, instead of acting like a loser.

Finally, Mike returned to his bedroom with a plate of Eggos that he immediately handed to El, he grinned when she took the plate instantly. "Thank you," she smiled sweetly as Mike hesitantly got onto his bed and shuffled himself back, so he was sat next to her. There was a small space between them, but he could still feel her body heat and it was making him dizzy.

"No problem," he grinned, his eyes lingering on hers a moment too long before he cleared his throat and grabbed the remote control. "Are you ready to begin watching the best movie franchise that was ever created?" he teased her.

El rolled her eyes in amusement, "I guess we'll find out." She goaded back. Mike bit his lower lip to contain his dopey grin before unpausing the movie.

The iconic music began, the volume making El jump slightly which then caused her and Mike to laugh. She seemed surprised by the text of the back story and Mike hurried to read it out loud for her. El

smiled at him softly in thanks, her eyes on his face as he spoke dramatically.

This has to have been the only time a Star Wars film hadn't gripped Mike's attention. He spent the majority of the film staring at El, smiling to himself bashfully as she nibbled on her Eggos, her eyes wide with interest as the story unfolded. He noticed how her breath caught in her throat when Luke returned to find his Aunt and Uncle had been murdered, he resentfully watched a smile quirk on her lips when Han Solo was introduced, and his heart squeezed with warmth when she laughed at the obvious teasing between Princess Leia and Han Solo. Especially over the line, "*into the garbage flyboy!*"

"Did you enjoy that?" Mike asked the moment Princess Leia gave Han Solo and Luke medals for destroying the Death Star.

"I did," El said chuckling in surprise. "I've never seeing anything like that before." She admitted in awe.

Mike's heart was swelling with happiness and pride. Could she be any more perfect? "You wanna watch the next one?" he asked eagerly.

They had started '*A New Hope*' at 2pm, so he knew they would definitely get through all three of the movies and at least one Disney film if El agreed to stay late.

"Yes definitely," El said nodding. "I'm just going to go for a bathroom break first."

Mike smiled and watched as El got off the bed, watching her walk away with longing for a moment before shaking his head and changing over the videos. Once El was back, Mike had a bathroom break too and splashed his face with cold water, trying to ease his nerves over operation *Hold El's Hand*.

When he got back onto the bed he noticed that El scooted slightly closer to him, Mike gulped and kept his eyes on the screen, quickly playing the movie and once again reading out the description to El. Feeling a bit more confident now, he made his voice even more ridiculous, doing the classic deep movie voice that made her laugh loudly. He grinned to himself feeling pleased that he was the cause of

such an angelic noise.

Mike wasn't at all surprised that El's enthusiasm for Star Wars heightened during *'The Empire Strikes Back'* which was Mike's favourite of the saga. She sighed in relief when Han Solo and Leia reunited, grinning over their flirting and eye contact and practically swooning when the couple kissed. During the passionate moment Mike's cheeks flushed red and he thought back to when he had tried to lean in and kiss El the last time they were sat on his bed together.

Mike exhaled quietly, his eyes lingering on El's hand which was laying in the space between them. He swallowed nervously, his hand very slowly inching towards hers. He was almost there, his fingers seconds away from –

El gasped and moved her hand quickly to point over at Mike's desk. "It's the green creature!"

Mike blinked in confusion, looking from the desk to the television screen before he laughed in realisation, his disappointment at the ruined hand mission fading only slightly. "Yeah that's Yoda," he said grinning as he watched the Jedi master teaching Luke the ways of the force.

When Lando first appeared on the screen Mike observed El, waiting for her reaction to the betrayal of Han Solo and Leia. The moment Lando opened the door and Darth Vader appeared, waiting for them at the table El gasped loudly. "He betrayed them!" she shouted in outrage.

"Yep," Mike nodded, stuck between smiling at how cute El was and how serious the moment in the movie was. His eyes went back down to her hand, this time he set his shoulders in determination. He could totally do this.

But before he could reach for El's hand, she reached for his instead, gasping in suspense as Han was minutes away from being encased in a block of carbonite. Mike jumped too, but not from the movie, from the feel of El's fingers lacing with his almost like their bodies took over the action.

Mike looked down at their joined hands, a hopeful and giddy smile taking over his lips. His smile was so wide it hurt his cheeks, but he chose to ignore the pain in favour of the fact that El was *holding* his hand! He didn't think he had ever been so happy in his life. He sighed quietly, his chest warm with contentedness.

One of the most famous lines of the franchise was about to happen, Leia and Han Solo shared another passionate kiss that made Mike's throat dry and his heart to race as he imagined kissing El like that.

"I love you."

"I know."

Mike's gaze turned to El's face, he couldn't help it. And when she turned and looked at him, their eyes locking in a look that said so much, he couldn't look away.

He watched with baited breath as El's eyes flickered down to his lips, but the moment abruptly ended when Han Solo was frozen, the loud hiss of the carbonate making Mike and El jump. They both hesitantly moved their eyes back onto the screen, a matching blush on their cheeks whilst their fingers stayed locked together.

El gasped in shock when Vader cut off Luke's hand and squeezed Mike's hand in response. He couldn't help but grin to himself, knowing that the biggest reveal in cinematic history was about to happen.

"Obi Wan never told you what happened to your father."

"He told me enough. He told me you killed him."

"No. I am your father."

"What?!" El yelped in shock whilst Mike chuckled, loving her wide hazel eyes and how her jaw had dropped. "Oh my god," she said shaking her head. "This can't be *true* Mike!" El turned to look at him but all he could do was grin.

"It is El." He assured her, smiling playfully at how unfairly adorable she was.

By the end of the film she was breathless, "I'm ready for the next one." She said the moment the credits came up. Mike laughed but obeyed her orders, scooting over to the television and taking out the video, putting in *'Return of the Jedi'*.

He looked at his watch and turned to El, "you want something to eat or drink?"

El looked at the television longingly but nodded. "What do you have?"

"Well we can order something in if you like. Would you prefer pizza or Chinese food?" Mike asked quickly pausing the film before it could begin.

"I like both," El admitted giving him a smile that warmed his body up instantly. "You choose."

"Okay," Mike said with a grin. "Well we'll probably be having pizza tomorrow night at the sleepover, so Chinese it is." They spent the next five minutes going through the menu, picking their food before Mike ordered.

"Right movie time," El said eagerly, patting the duvet next to her for Mike who had just brought them in two glasses of water. He laughed at her enthusiasm, feeling light and happy, knowing he never wanted her to leave.

He took his seat next to her, this time there was no gap between them, their legs touching from hip to toes and their fingers immediately finding each other, clasping into a firm hold. Mike and El shared a bashful grin before he played the movie.

He once again found himself watching El closely, loving her swooning reaction to Princess Leia saving Han. Mike blushed when Leia appeared as Jabba's slave in the gold bikini. He couldn't stop himself from imagining El in the same outfit and his mouth began to water. He was relieved when there was a knock at the door and he was able to take himself out of the moment to retrieve the food.

El paused the film using her powers and they took a short break to

plate up their dinner. It wasn't long before they were tucked back on the bed, eating happily, their toes knocking together playfully as they continued to watch the movie.

Before Obi Wan could even confirm that the other Skywalker that a dying Yoda spoke of was Leia, El spoke up with a knowing grin, "it's Princess Leia isn't it. Luke's twin."

Mike laughed and turned to the beautiful girl he was sitting so close with. "How did you know?"

El shrugged bashfully, playing with her noodles for a moment. "I guessed they were siblings in *Return of the Jedi* when Luke sent the message telepathically to Leia and she responded, saving him."

"You're amazing." Mike blurted out, his eyes warm and tender as he stared at El. She smiled shyly, and her cheeks blushed a pretty pink. She shrugged her shoulders gently and grinned down at her food before turning back to the movie. Mike continued to stare at her for a while, smiling lovingly.

El fawned over the Ewoks, stating to Mike they were so cute whilst he was desperate to say "not as cute as you" but resisted the urge.

By the time Luke tried to attack the Emperor before duelling with his father, Mike and El had long since finished their food. Their plates were now to the side and they were back to holding hands, this time it was Mike who had the courage to gently entwine his fingers with El's and earned a beautiful smile from her in response.

El was seemingly captivated by Luke and Vader's battle. How they argued over the dark and the light, and Luke's reaction when Darth Vader discovered Leia was his daughter and exclaimed that he would turn her to the dark side if Luke didn't join him.

Mike was staring at El again when Vader saved Luke's life and died himself, he noticed how her lower lip pouted out sadly and her brow lowered. His heart ached with love as he watched the emotions so clear on her face.

Her eyes were misty as Luke cremated Vader's body and she sighed

heavily, before turning her beautiful hazel orbs onto Mike. "That was incredible." She admitted.

Mike allowed himself to grin slightly smugly, "I told you." He teased gently nudging her shoulder with his.

El giggled softly and rolled her eyes, "you haven't seen *my* movies yet."

"Well let's get on it," Mike said eagerly, stopping the film and putting it back in its case as El enthusiastically handed him over Beauty and the Beast.

They readjusted their positions on the bed, El taking Mike's hand and making him almost jump out of his skin when she sighed happily and rested her head against his upper arm. His eyes widened in surprise and he tried not to breathe too loudly, terrified she would hear his pounding heart.

The narrators voice started the movie dramatically and Mike listened carefully, surprised already as he understood what the story would be about. He had to admit that the storyline seemed to have an important message of loving someone from the inside out. That beauty wasn't everything. He sure could have used that message when he was an awkward child, being bullied and called frog face.

The moment Belle came onto the screen Mike couldn't help but grin, his eyes flicking down to El thinking how she looked a lot like her. He squeezed her hand gently and she glanced up at him, a sweet and happy grin on her face.

Mike sniggered when he saw Gaston, "Jesus, he reminds me of this mouth breather I went to school with." He chuckled thinking of Troy. El giggled and her head nuzzled slightly into his upper arm making Mike beam with joy.

He would never admit to *anyone* that he was kind of freaked out by the Beast, especially when he shouted at Belle keeping her prisoner and chucked Maurice out into the cold.

It didn't take long for Mike to realise why El loved this film, the slow

and growing romance between Belle and the Beast was sweet, especially their snow ball fight. The imagery during their dancing scene in the ballroom was simply stunning and Mike felt oddly choked when Belle cried over the Beast dying.

Mike swallowed anxiously, watching the last petal of the rose drift delicately to the bottom of the glass. "He's going to live right?" he couldn't help but ask El nervously.

She looked up at him with a gentle smile, "just wait and see." She whispered. Mike nodded, his heart fluttering at how beautiful she was before he tried to refocus on the movie. Of course the Beast lived, soon transforming into the prince that he really was inside.

"What did you think?" El asked the moment the movie finished, she pulled back from his arm to look at him fully. Mike was going to tease that it was rubbish but when he saw the hope in her stunning hazel eyes he knew he couldn't even joke.

"It was a really beautiful story, I liked the message that came with it. And Lumiere and Cogsworth were hilarious." He admitted, his own pleased grin quirking on his lips at how obviously happy it made El to hear his confession.

It was 11.30pm but neither El or Mike brought up how late it was getting, because it was very obvious that they didn't want the night to end.

"So, it's time for *The Little Mermaid* then?" Mike said sighing heavily, pretending to be exasperated. El playfully shoved his shoulder at his teasing, her amused smile making Mike feel like he could break into song like one of the Disney characters.

"It certainly is," El said happily. "But bathroom break first and maybe another drink?" she proposed making Mike nod eagerly in agreement.

When El went to the bathroom Mike refilled their drinks and quickly made some popcorn, jumping in surprise when El came to join him in the kitchen. Both of them talking about '*Beauty and the Beast*' whilst the kernels popped.

They tucked back onto the bed, the large bowl of popcorn between them as Mike played the film and settled in for his second Disney movie of the night.

The animation of *'The Little Mermaid'* wasn't as good as *'Beauty and the Beast'* but Mike still smiled at the colourful characters, laughing at Sebastian in particular. The moment Ariel started to sing *'Part of Your World'* a realisation hit Mike at how similar El was to this mermaid. The courage, sense of adventure and wanting more than what they were getting in life was just like the beautiful brunette beside him.

Maybe it was thinking that El's personality was like Ariel's that made Mike so stunned when she shyly mumbled, "I think you look like Eric..."

Mike blinked in surprise, staring between the animated prince and the blush on El's cheeks as she looked up at him bashfully. "You think I look like him?" he asked breathlessly.

El giggled at his stunned expression and nodded gently. "Yes, I do. Except for the eyes of course. Yours are more beautiful than his." she admitted before leaning her head back on Mike's upper arm and leaving him gaping like a fish.

His cheeks were bright red and he slowly grinned, unable to stop himself from smiling like a fool at her compliment. After a while he tried to get back into the film, frowning at the creepy Ursula and how she stole Ariel's voice in exchange for legs.

It wasn't long before Ariel was reunited with Eric who she had earlier saved from drowning. This time though she couldn't speak to him, not that it seemed to bother either of them from falling in love.

Mike grinned at poor Sebastian who almost got cooked for dinner and then blushed at the glances that Eric and Ariel were sharing, looks that he was positive he had been giving El ever since he met her.

His blushed pink cheeks went gradually to red when a certain song began to play and made his heart race as he listened to the words, his eyes slowly drifting from Eric and Ariel in their boat to El who was

still resting her head against him.

"There you see her, sitting there across the way. She don't got a lot to say, but there's something about her. And you don't know why but you're dying to try, you wanna kiss the girl."

Mike gulped nervously, his breath hitching as he continued to stare at El. His heart beat was getting louder and louder.

"Yes, you want her, look at her, you know you do. It's possible she wants you too, there is one way to ask her..."

El seemed to know Mike was staring at her because she ever so slowly moved away from leaning on his arm and looked up at his face, her lips slightly parted as her eyes locked with his.

Mike knew that his emotions were written all over his face. He had no way of hiding the love and longing that was shining in his eyes. He was shaking as they gazed at each other, soft, nervous and welcoming.

Without even know what was happening Mike's hand slowly lifted to El's face, his palm cupping her cheek. She gasped in surprise, her pupils dilating as she stared back at him. Mike swallowed anxiously, his heart beat pounding in his ears as he slowly moved forward.

El was moving too, both of them completely drawn to each other like magnets. Her eyes were closing, and Mike's heavy lids slipped closed too. He could feel her warm breath on his face, the ghost of her lips and then –

"Shit!"

Mike and El gasped, both of them jolting from each other like they had been electrocuted before turning to the source of the sound.

Dustin was stood in the open doorway, his eyes moving frantically from Mike to El, and then from El to Mike, a shit eating grin slowly spreading on his lips. "Studying huh?" he teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

Mike considered himself a good guy, he wasn't violent, and he had

never committed a crime in his life. But he would be lying if he wasn't currently debating on chucking Dustin out of the nearest window. He glared at his friend, practically throwing daggers with his dark eyes.

"Dustin," Mike said through clenched teeth. "I thought you were at Lucas's?"

Dustin snorted and entered the room, chucking his bag on his bed. "Yeah and it's like 1am Mike. I'm tired man," he said yawning and throwing himself onto his bed.

El coughed awkwardly and Mike almost snapped his neck turning back to her. Her cheeks were red, and he was positive his would be a mirror image. "I should really get going," she admitted begrudgingly.

Mike heaved a sigh knowing that she was going to say that. He felt an incredible remorse for not having got to kiss her. *Dustin and his fucking timing!*

"Okay El," Mike mumbled sadly, understanding that it was late, and he needed her to get some sleep, especially if they would be meeting up later that day to go to Will's house.

"Hold on." Dustin piped up, his eyes firmly planted on El. "*Eleven?! Holy shit you're actually real!*" he gasped, his jaw dropping to the floor before he instantly became a fan girl, jumping to his feet and flapping over to a surprised El.

"Holy fuck, we all thought Mike made you up!" Dustin told her, his eyes wide and manic.

"Dustin!" Mike shouted exasperated. "Will you just calm down?"

Dustin however had clutched his hands together in front of El in a begging manner. "Oh my god, can you use your powers? *Please?! You are like the coolest person ever!*"

Mike was beyond embarrassed and kicked Dustin away with his foot, but the boy was relentless. El just giggled at the craziness of the curly haired fool and Mike's annoyance.

"Sure," she said smiling as Dustin practically squealed in excitement. She looked around the room for a moment, her eyebrows lowered in concentration before she found what she was looking for.

Mike and Dustin turned to see the model Millennium Falcon lift from the floor and float in the air, zooming around the room twice before gently lowering onto Dustin's bed. He screamed in awe. "Holy fuck! El I love you!"

"DUSTIN!"

"Shut up Mike, you had your chance – "

"Dustin seriously *shut up*!"

El laughed loudly, breaking through the boy's argument and getting to her feet, her eyes landing on Mike softly. "I really do need to go." She admitted, sighing sadly.

Mike nodded numbly, knowing that this time had to come but it didn't make it any easier. The only solace was the fact that he would be seeing her in 12 hours. They had already discussed that Mike would meet El on campus and then they would walk together to Will's house.

El turned awkwardly to Dustin, smiling slightly at the strange awe that was still plastered over his face. "Nice to meet you Dustin," she said kindly.

Dustin immediately grabbed her hand shaking it frantically and making El giggle when she noticed Mike rolling his eyes. "It was an honour El. An *honour*!"

El finally extracted her hand from Dustin's and picked up her bag, busying herself with putting her videos away whilst Mike continued to glare at his best friend for interrupting what he *knew* was going to be a monumental moment in his life.

"I'll walk you out," Mike mumbled sadly, disappointment still etched in his voice as El nodded in response and waved goodbye to Dustin who was still looking like a fan girl as Mike and El left the room. They walked down the corridor in silence, both of them consumed

with their own thoughts for the moment.

It was when they reached the front door that they both hesitated. Mike shoved his hands into his jeans pockets to stop himself from fidgeting.

"I'm really sorry about Dustin," he exclaimed, cringing in embarrassment. "I promise that my other friends will react a lot more normal to you. Dustin's he's just...well he's obsessed with super heroes." Mike admitted, shrugging slightly.

El grinned, "it's okay, I take it as a compliment I guess."

Mike smiled in response because El was smiling so warmly and it made him want to sing and dance with happiness.

"I had the best time tonight El." He said breathlessly, his eyes drawn in to the bright hazel orbs.

El bit her lower lip as she tried to suppress her wide grin making Mike's heart skip a beat. "It was the best night of my life," she admitted. The reality of her words making Mike's breath catch in his throat. He knew she didn't exactly have a lot of good memories in her life, but the fact *he* was a part of the best night of her life meant everything to him.

Mike beamed, practically glowing brighter than the moon. "I'm sorry we didn't get to finish *The Little Mermaid*. I was enjoying it," he confessed. *And I was also enjoying how we almost kissed.*

"Oh, there will be a next time," El assured him seriously before smiling. "You need to see the rest of it and then we can move onto other Disney films."

Mike laughed, not surprised that she was still routing for Disney. "Come on, you've got to admit that Star Wars is the best though?"

El sighed and rolled her eyes in amusement at his goading, "I will admit it was pretty great."

"Ha! So, I win?" Mike teased grinning like the fool in love that he was.

El smirked at him, her eyes playful. "For now."

Mike immediately did a little dance making El burst out laughing, her eyes full of mirth. "What on earth is *that*?" she gasped whilst giggling.

"It's my victory dance!" Mike exclaimed defensively, stopping to a halt his arms still out. He grinned at El's laughter, allowing the warmth and happiness in her tone creep into his chest and make his heart soar.

When they both calmed down from laughing, El looked up at Mike softly, looking unfairly beautiful. "So, I guess I'll see you in 12 hours then?" she asked quietly taking a step closer to him.

Mike felt his throat close up with nerves as her proximity became the only thing he could think about. "Y-Yeah 12 hours," he croaked out as her converse trainers touched his sneakers.

For a moment his hopes were dashed when El leaned up but went in for a hug. But the embrace was certainly *not* disappointing. Hugging her in the void had been amazing, but this was just incredible. Inhaling her scent, feeling the warmth of her body against his as he wrapped his arms around her whilst her arms wrapped around his neck. Mike closed his eyes and smiled to himself, wanting to memorise this feeling for when she wasn't here.

Just as El was pulling away slowly she seemed to hesitate for a moment and then before Mike even realised what she was doing, her lips pressed to his cheek, soft and lingering. His heart immediately froze, and his breath stuttered in shock.

Her lips gently left his skin and Mike's cheeks immediately flooded with colour, his eyes were as wide as saucers as he stared at El in surprise. She smiled at him gently, seemingly pleased with herself.

"Good night Mike," she said softly, almost *coyly*.

"G-Good night El," Mike choked out breathlessly as he watched her walking away from him. When she reached the door, she looked back at him over her shoulder, a mischievous smirk on her face before she disappeared into the night.

Mike stood frozen in place for a good five minutes before he slowly lifted his fingers to his cheek, smiling giddily with an unprecedented amount of happiness.

He somehow made it back to his room, stumbling and almost falling over the stairs twice due to his distraction.

"Dude!" Dustin exclaimed the moment Mike was back in the dorm room. "El is amazing! Holy shit, did you see what she did with the Millennium Falcon?! I can't wait for the others to meet her. Especially Will, *finally* there will be someone – "

Mike wasn't listening to a word Dustin was saying, practically floating to his bed with the sappiest grin still plastered on his lips. He undressed down to his boxers and sank into his bed, sighing happily and staring up at the ceiling whilst Dustin continued to talk enthusiastically.

In 11 hours and 49 minutes Mike would get to see El again.

And he could not wait.

Aw Michael Wheeler you're so cute!

Thank you for reading :-)) I would LOVE to know your thoughts on this one please!

7. Secrets and Friends

Part of Your World

AN: Ahh it's been like two weeks since I last updated POYW and I'm freaking out! Lol

But have no fear because this is currently the only story I'm working on, so it has my full attention now

I'm also currently on holiday (or vacation as some of you say!) so I'm getting to do lots of writing which I am loving.

This chapter is dedicated to robysel and chelseapenny, because you're both amazing and I hope you are feeling better soon!

Chapter 7: Secrets and Friends

Saturday 25th January 1992

El walked back from Mike's dormitory building in a daze. She had what felt like a permanent smile plastered on her lips and a light in her eyes that she knew would be hard to diminish. The feel of his skin against her lips was still making her tingle with electricity and her heart was continuously fluttering in her chest.

She couldn't feel the bitter cold January air against her bare legs or the way the wind whipped at her hair. In fact, she didn't think she had ever been so warm in her life. It felt like heat was radiating from her chest, emitting warmth all over her body. *Is this what love feels like?* Her thoughts whispered gently, and she only smiled wider at the prospect.

El was brought back to reality when she passed two men stumbling out of a bar who took one look at her and wolf whistled from across the street. She looked up at them, fixing them with a deadly stare, "mouth breathers," she muttered under her breath before continuing her walk. Luckily for them they didn't follow her, it wasn't the first time she had knocked out late night creeps and she wouldn't hesitate

to do it again.

She shivered slightly, the cold of the night finally seeping into her flesh and reminding her brain of the freezing temperatures. El set her eyes on a McDonald's in the distance and decided she'd change in the restroom back into her jeans and hoodie before making her way to the warehouse.

Her legs had goose bumps by the time she entered the fast food restaurant and she shuddered as the warmth from the kitchen heated up her body. El immediately headed for the public restroom, swinging her bag along with her.

As soon as she was in a cubicle she pulled off her skirt, smiling to herself as she remembered picking it out the day before with Max. The red head had insisted that she "showed a bit of leg" and El had to admit that from the way Mike had looked at her, it had certainly proven that he was attracted to her just like she was to him.

El quickly pulled on her jeans and pulled her hoodie over the cream sweater that Max had insisted would show off her curves without being slutty. She grinned to herself thinking about her new friend. *Friend*. It was probably one of El's favourite words, something she had never truly felt would be significant to her until now. Of course, Mike was her friend too, her *best* friend in fact. But even that word didn't seem special enough for him.

She became distracted once more thinking about the handsome Michael Wheeler, having to lean back against the cubicle and grin sappily to herself as she remembered the look of happy surprise on his face when she had kissed his cheek. El had wanted to kiss him on the lips but lost her nerve at the last minute.

She wanted it to be special and that moment didn't feel as special as it had when they were sat on his bed watching *'The Little Mermaid'*. But there would be a next time, she was positive of that. In fact, in about 11 hours and 30 minutes she would get to experience being in Mike's presence all over again.

El bought a hot drink from the McDonald's counter and then finally headed back to the warehouse, for the first time that night she was

beginning to worry about what Kali and the others would say if they were still awake when she got back.

She wanted to tell them about Mike, she wasn't ashamed of him, but she *was* scared of what they would say about him. El knew Kali would immediately tell her to no longer see him, and she didn't think she could face up to that truth. Not yet at least.

When El entered the warehouse she tried to be as quiet as possible, tiptoeing across the cold concrete flooring towards the metal staircase that led up to the makeshift bedrooms. Her heart which had been pounding in her ears from adrenaline started to fall into a lull of security that she had made it back without being caught.

The dark and sparse area that the gang used as a living room erupted into a warm light when the click of a lamp was switched on. El looked up quickly, her gaze locking with Kali's almost immediately. The latter had an expression of relief that was masked with anger.

"Where have you *been* Eleven?" Kali practically hissed from the hushed tone of her voice mixing with her exasperation.

El swallowed nervously, averting her eyes from Kali's penetrating stare. "I...I didn't realise how late it had got..." she mumbled out. It wasn't technically a lie after all, because time didn't seem to matter when she was with Mike. Nothing else mattered but him, and his sparkling dark eyes and beautiful smile.

Kali heaved a harsh breath and shook her head slightly, "I have been waiting for you sister. I was worried." El felt guilt burning in her gut from how concerned Kali was for her, how she had been sat there waiting for her to come back safely.

"I *told* you someone has been following us and you think it is *okay* to stay out that late?" Kali asked sharply, getting up from her seat and making El cower slightly at how upset she was.

"I'm sorry," El croaked, her stomach flipping uncomfortably, and her lips lowered in a frown at how she had caused her sister such anxiety. "It won't happen again."

Kali sighed, and her eyes softened just slightly but her jaw was still clenched. "Good," she nodded taking a deep breath. "We need to stick together Eleven. Someone out there is following us, someone wants to *hurt* us. And I think we both know who that is. We need to dispose of him before he disposes of *us*."

Her words were solemn and El felt the seriousness of the situation hitting her once more. She felt foolish for letting herself get distracted, for allowing herself to imagine a life without bad men and purely surviving from one day to the next. It wasn't the life that she could have, that had been determined from the moment she was taken from her mother's womb.

El nodded unable to speak because her throat felt constricted and tight from the realisation that she couldn't see Mike anymore. It was too dangerous, for him, for her and for Kali. Her sole focus needed to be on destroying Brenner for good.

She followed Kali up the stairs not long after their talk, closing her bedroom door and changing into her pyjamas as if she was on auto pilot. El felt numb from her emotions, the prospect of never seeing Mike again was making her feel sick. There was no time for Disney movies to cheer her up, she just needed to sleep and accept her fate.

But while she thought she could control her life, she *couldn't* control her feelings. Especially not for him.

El lay awake for a while, staring up at the dark ceiling, the warm hum of Mike's laughter ringing in her ears, the surprised and happy grin on his face when she kissed his cheek flashing through her mind and the feel of his body close to hers sending a shiver up her spine.

She couldn't stop seeing him.

She *should*.

But she couldn't.

With a groan of frustration El turned over, pulling the blankets up to her chin and closing her eyes, trying to welcome sleep, hoping it would ease her worries and soothe her thoughts. She was playing a

dangerous game and she just hoped she wouldn't get burnt.

Mike took a space on the granite steps leading up to the Department of Computer Science and sat down, wincing slightly at the way the freezing flat stone surface bled through his jeans making him shiver from the cold. He pulled his coat closer to his body and stuck his hands in his pocket, occasionally turning his head from one side to the other on the lookout for El.

It was 12.50pm and they had agreed to meet here on campus in ten minutes time so Mike could walk El to Will's house. Mike still couldn't believe she had agreed to come and meet his friends and Joyce. He knew she wasn't going to stay for the sleepover but getting to spend time with her was totally worth it, even if it was just for the afternoon.

He hoped Will, Max, Lucas and Joyce's reaction to El would be *a lot* better than Dustin's. Mike cringed just thinking about how his roommate had been so blatantly in awe of the beautiful superhero and completely over the top. Of course, Mike was in awe of her too, but he liked to think he was a bit more composed...right?

His own theory was put to the test when he looked up and immediately caught El's eye from where she was walking up to him with a smile. Mike gulped, his hands still stuffed in his pockets were starting to shake from nerves. She looked gorgeous all over again and it was very hard to cope with. Mike hoped he wouldn't feel so out of control *every time* he saw her because it was kind of pathetic.

El was wearing the same fitted cream sweater and denim jacket from yesterday, coupled with a pair of black jeans that clung to her legs in a way that made Mike gulp anxiously. She had a small bag slung over her shoulder and Mike wanted to audibly sigh at how just looking at her had his heart hammering in his chest.

He slowly stood up, worried if he went any quicker he would stumble because he couldn't concentrate on anything else but the light in her eyes and the relieved smile on her face. Mike could no longer feel the icy air or the blistering wind, he could only feel a warmth that was creeping from his chest and spreading all over his body.

"Hi," Mike said breathlessly the moment El was in ear shot. She paused by the bottom of the steps and he tried to make his way down to her, grabbing his own bag and stumbling slightly here and there, blushing at his lack of coordination.

"Hi," El beamed in response, an amused smile quirking on her lips as she held her hands out to press on his shoulders to stop him from falling off the last step. She giggled softly, her eyes flicking down to his feet and back up to his red face. "You really are very clumsy." She said it like it was a fact but there was no annoyance in her voice, just humour.

Mike grinned like the fool he was and shrugged, trying not to hyperventilate at how El was still holding onto his shoulders even though he was no longer at risk of falling. "I was just born this way." He teased, a smirk slowly playing on his lips. "You were born with your gifts and I guess I've got some gifts of my own too."

El looked at him in surprise for a moment and Mike's heart froze wondering if he had gone too far. Why did he think it was okay to joke about her powers? Just when he was about to apologise El laughed, full on laughed at his comment and gave him a beautiful smile that had him melting into a puddle of fluff.

"You're very funny," She giggled, taking her hands off his shoulders. Mike hoped the disappointment at the lack of contact didn't show up on his face, but then El reached for his hand and all was right in the world again. Mike beamed at the beautiful girl, a blush creeping up his neck as their fingers instinctively entwined together.

"So how far away is Will's house?" El asked as they started to walk, their arms swinging gently together from where their hands were clasped.

Mike glanced at El and smiled softly, "it's only a ten-minute walk away. Is that okay?"

"Of course," she replied sharing his grin, both of them staring at each other so much that they were hardly looking where they were going. When Mike almost took them in the wrong direction he refocused his efforts on concentrating on their destination.

"Did you get much sleep last night?" Mike asked, unsure of how long it had taken her to get home. He didn't even know where home was for El, it wasn't something she had discussed with him before and he didn't want to push her for information. No matter how curious he was about her life and the people in it.

El cleared her throat and looked down at the pavement in front of them. "Um, yeah, I slept fine..."

Mike frowned knowing she wasn't being honest. He had been around her so little and yet he could tell when she was lying instantly. Mike didn't know if it was just obvious or whether he was in sync with her emotions. He didn't press her on the issue though, sensing it wasn't something she was happy to discuss. Instead Mike just nodded and gave her a reassuring smile.

They walked in comfortable silence for a while until he noticed that El shivered and tried to pull her jacket closer to her body. Mike came to a halt making her stop too when his hand tugged on hers. "Here," he said calmly before shrugging off his winter coat and handing it over to the freezing girl.

El looked at the black warm coat and then turned her hazel eyes onto Mike's face. "No Mike I can't. You'll be cold." She said seriously, shaking her head for good measure.

Mike couldn't help but chuckle and grin at how cute she was. "El I can't let you freeze to death, especially not when I'm about to introduce you to my friends," he teased, pushing the coat further forward to her. "Besides, I've got a hoodie on and a sweater, I'll be fine." He added with reassurance, not wanting her to feel bad. Mike knew he probably *would* be freezing but if he got a chance to be chivalrous like those Disney princes she liked so much, then he would happily turn into an icicle.

El sighed begrudgingly put took the coat anyway, both of them laughing at how much she drowned inside of it. It fell down just below her knees and Mike watched as she snuggled into it and gave him a shy grin. "It's comfy," she admitted. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Mike smiled in return, his eyes soft and adoring as

he took her in, her slim figure tucked away inside of *his* coat. They joined hands again and carried on with their journey.

After another five minutes Mike and El entered Dorchester Avenue which was a long straight road comprising of so many houses they were practically on top of each other. It wasn't the nicest of neighbours, with many run-down houses, broken porches and unkept gardens with weeds sticking out of the uneven flagstones.

But it was home to Will and Joyce, and Mike had only ever felt welcome and warm inside of their modest house. It only had two bedrooms, not that anyone seemed to mind, whenever there was a sleepover at the property, the party always slept in the living room and when Jonathan was home for the holidays he shared a room with his brother.

Mike didn't notice the way that El looked around suspiciously, or how she glanced behind her shoulder, that feeling of being followed making her spine tingle uneasily. She subconsciously grasped onto Mike's hand even tighter and allowed him to lead her to the house.

"Here we are," he said happily as they walked up the rickety steps of the porch and faced the front door. Mike knocked gently on the glass panel of the door and then turned to El, hearing her clear her throat.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly, his brow furrowed in concern.

"Yeah," she gasped taking a deep breath. "Just a little nervous."

Mike only had time to give her an understanding smile before the front door opened and Joyce appeared, her hair was a little messy and she had flour on her cheeks, but she was smiling like normal.

"Mike!" she shouted, immediately drawing him into a tight motherly hug.

"Hi Joyce," Mike chuckled propping his chin on her dainty shoulder for a moment before pulling back. Before he had even straightened up Joyce was looking at El who was standing there awkwardly, her hands wringing together nervously.

"Joyce this is El, my um..." Mike froze, his throat tight as he realised

how he would like to introduce her but knowing that he definitely couldn't overstep the mark and just *assume* things. "My friend. My really good friend." He croaked, trying to ignore the slightly disappointed look on El's face because it just made his emotions more confusing than ever.

"El it's so lovely to meet you!" Joyce exclaimed, pulling the beautiful girl into a warm embrace. El looked slightly panicked like she wasn't used to this kind of affection, but she slowly wrapped her arms around Joyce in return and Mike saw a fleeting smile on El's face that broke his heart slightly. He guessed she had never been hugged by a mother before.

"It's nice to meet you too Joyce," she said quietly, before pulling away and smiling up at Mike in what looked like relief that the older woman didn't hate her. Like she ever could.

"Come in, come in!" Joyce called happily, ushering Mike and El in before she closed and locked the front door. "I was just making a birthday cake for you Mike," she added with a warm grin to the tall dark-haired boy.

"More like *trying* to make a cake," came a teasing voice that Mike would recognise anywhere. He looked up to see Will descending the stairs, a friendly smile on his face and curiosity in his green eyes when they flickered to El.

"Oh shush you," Joyce chuckled, affectionately messing up Will's hair as soon as he was in reach. Her son tried getting away from her grasp and rolled his eyes in amusement as he sorted out his hair whilst Joyce shouted that she needed to put the cake in the oven and then she'd make everyone a drink.

"Hey Will," Mike said happily, sharing a quick hug with his best friend before turning slightly to look at the beautiful girl who was appraising Will with curiosity.

"El this is Will, Will this is El." Mike exclaimed nervously. He had no idea why he was anxious about them both meeting, but he knew it had something to do with the fact that they both had powers and he found himself worried that El would be more interested in Will than

she ever was in him. After all, her and Will had a lot in common.

And while Mike hadn't told Joyce about El, Will knew everything. He had been a part of 'Operation Find The Jedi' adeptly named by Dustin, even if Will hadn't been part of the actual search he knew about El's powers and she knew about his.

"It's good to meet you El," Will said with a warm smile as he moved forward to give the girl a brisk hug. He glanced over at Mike and smirked before looking back at El. "Mike talks about you *all* the time."

"*Will!*"

"What?! It's true!" Will laughed, El was giggling and smiling adoringly at Mike's embarrassment. Her grin made it all worth it and he begrudgingly smiled back bashfully, trying to ignore his bright red cheeks.

"It's nice to meet you too Will," El said once she had settled down from her laughter over Mike's blushing. "I have never met anyone else with powers, except my sister." She explained quietly, her eyes slightly shift as if she was concerned someone might jump out.

Will smiled and looked calmer than Mike had ever seen him. "I've never met anyone with powers. I thought it was just me." He confessed with a heavy sigh. "It's kind of cool that I'm not alone, but Mike...well he told me that your experience has been pretty different to mine..."

Mike's dark eyes went to El and she nodded solemnly. "Yes, the lab is all I knew until I was eighteen."

Will looked horrified and turned from the girl to Mike, as if wanting to see the truth in his best friend's eyes which he immediately recognised. "El I'm so sorry."

She sighed and shrugged, "I'm no longer there...and I've met Mike, so things are good now," El admitted giving Mike a shy smile and not realising how her words had made fireworks explode in his heart. She thought things were good in her life because she had met *him*?! Him, Michael Wheeler, king of the nerds? Socially awkward and clumsy as

hell Michael Wheeler?

Will caught Mike's awe over her words and from his playful smirk, he knew that he was going to get relentless teasing about this later. But Mike couldn't make himself care about the teasing, because it was all worth it when El was saying things were good in her life now because of *him*. He couldn't stop the pleased and slightly painful grin from etching into his cheeks.

"Is tea good for everyone?" Joyce called from the kitchen where they could hear her clattering around.

Will looked at El and Mike in question, both of them nodding their heads in agreement. "Yeah we're all happy with tea mom!" he responded back in a shout before motioning the couple to follow him into the living room which was small but cosy.

El sat down on the couch next to Mike and he was immediately thankful for the crowded space meaning that their legs were touching from hips to toes. It sent a shiver down his spine that wasn't caused by the freezing temperatures outside.

Will flopped down into a cushy armchair and faced the couple smirking playfully as he looked at their shy expressions at being so close together. He leaned back into the cushions and turned his gaze solely onto El for a moment. "Do you want to tell my mom about your powers? You don't have to of course, it's just she's always been very supportive for me." He exclaimed clearly hoping that he wasn't encroaching on what she was comfortable with.

El frowned, torn between wanting to know more about Will's journey and Joyce's thoughts but also nervous about letting more people in on her secret. What would Kali think?

She tried not to think about her sister and what she wanted, and for once think about what *El* wanted.

"Here we go," Joyce interrupted the tension in a sing song voice as she walked into the living room with a tray laden with steaming mugs and cookies. She was careful of where she stood trying to manoeuvre around the armchair and the couch, so she could place

the tray on the coffee table.

"There," she said happily before turning to the young group, her smile faltering when she noticed their matching serious expressions. "What is it?" Joyce asked with concern, her kind eyes flickering from El, to Mike and then onto her son.

Will exhaled slowly and met his mother's stare. "Mom, there's something you should know..."

"So you were stuck in that place from when you were *born*?" Joyce sniffled sorrowfully, sitting on the other side of El and clutching the young girl's hand whilst she dabbed at her own tears with the other.

"Yes," El practically whispered, the one word holding more emotion than either Mike, Will or Joyce could even comprehend.

"Oh sweet heart, I'm so sorry," Joyce gasped before pulling El into a soothing embrace, clutching onto her like she were her own daughter. El's tension seemed to bleed away and she clung onto Joyce, burying her head slightly in the older woman's shoulder.

Mike and Will watched on helplessly, sharing concerned glances. Mike knew it was a hard topic for El to talk about, and he hated the fact that it made her so sad, but he couldn't help but be thankful that Joyce now knew. He could already tell that she wanted to be a mother figure to El, who had never got to experience that kind of love before.

"Those *bastards*," Joyce hissed out in anger, her whole body tense with fury as she continued to hold onto El. She closed her eyes and shook her head in frustration, "if I had known sweet heart that you and other children were still there, I would have done something I promise. I am *so* sorry."

"It's not your fault," El's voice was slightly muffled from where her face was pushed into Joyce's warm red sweater.

"I have a friend whose daughter was taken by those people and killed during the experiments," Joyce muttered quietly, Will and Mike both

frowning in confusion at each other.

"What do you mean mom?" Will asked with concern, not sure to who she was referring.

"It doesn't matter." Joyce said sighing heavily, "he has never been the same since and he always believed that those bastards were still kidnapping children. I just wish I had believed him." There was a sombre look on her face for a moment as she was clearly lost in her own thoughts and worries.

Everyone was quiet for a while until Joyce exhaled slowly and pulled away from El just enough to lift the beautiful girl's chin and look into her doe eyes. "If you or your sister *ever* need anything, I want you to come here okay?" she said seriously, her calming gaze filtering into El's more wider eyes.

El nodded, a small thankful smile lifting up her pink lips. Mike felt his chest feel a little lighter at finally seeing her relieving some of her pain. "Thank you, Joyce," she whispered, her voice choked.

Joyce looked at her lovingly, the same expression on her face that she gave to Will, Jonathan and the party. "Any time sweet heart, you can always feel at home here."

The sound of the timer in the kitchen went off loudly making the group all jump, breaking through the serious discussion and making them all smile sheepishly. "That'll be the cake!" Joyce said jumping up. She turned to El and grinned warmly, "would you like to help me decorate it? Heaven knows I'll ruin it."

El looked to Mike as if seeking permission, not that she needed it of course. But Mike just smiled at her reassuringly, wanting her to be able to relax here and know she could do whatever she wanted, she didn't need his consent to be herself.

"Yes please," El said taking Joyce's extended hand to help her off the cushy sofa. "I would like to help with Mike's cake." She added, her cheeks blushing a pretty pink.

Will and Mike watched the women disappear and then turned to each

other, both sighing at how heavy the conversation had been.

"That was intense." Will admitted, shuffling closer in his seat to Mike so he could talk quietly. "I didn't realise she had been through all of *that*. She is so brave."

"She is *incredible*." Mike said sighing in awe, as his eyes glanced towards the kitchen. "I just wish I could protect her from all of this. She deserves so much better than what she's been through."

"Oh I don't know," Will answered smiling slightly. "I'd say she's pretty happy with you. I mean she wanted to decorate your birthday cake and she kind of looks like at you like you invented the moon, sun and stars or something."

Mike averted his eyes to his lap where his knee was bouncing slightly from his nerves. "You think?" he asked feebly, slowly looking up to catch his best friend's gaze.

"Oh definitely." Will said knowingly with a smirk. "And wait until Max gets here, she'll tell you. That girl knows *everything*."

El had never decorated a cake in her life but found that it seemed to come natural as she carefully spread the chocolate frosting over the cake, mindful to keep it neat and smooth. When Mike popped his head around the door to ask if she needed help, El and Joyce both shooed him away playfully.

"You can't see it yet!" El said unable to hide her wide smile at how cute Mike was as he obediently covered his eyes with the palms of his hands. "It's a surprise until your birthday."

Mike chuckled and El could see his grin through the gap in his hands. "Okay, okay I'll leave you alone...for now."

He backed out still comically covering his eyes before turning and heading back to the living room where Will was setting up the table for the game of D&D they would be having. El didn't understand what D&D was but she was excited to watch Mike and his friends playing it.

El was still staring at the spot by the door where Mike had just stood, a longing in her eyes as she thought about the boy who completely changed her world, if he knew it yet or not.

"So," Joyce said clearing her throat and giving El a knowing smile. "You and Mike huh?"

El blushed and went back to putting more frosting on the cake. "He's very special," she admitted, keeping her gaze on a persistent crumb of cake that didn't want to be covered in chocolate.

"He certainly is," Joyce agreed handing El a piping bag full of whipped cream. "He's a lovely boy, I've known him since he was a baby and I can *tell* he likes you too honey."

El looked up at Joyce meeting her caring gaze. She couldn't help but smile in surprise, "really? Like...more than a friend?"

"Oh definitely," Joyce said seriously before smiling and showing El how to pipe the cream into small artistic blobs around the edge of the cake surface. "Mike wears his heart on his sleeve and he's never introduced a girl to the others, so you are very special sweetie." She added with a teasing wink to El who blushed, unable to hide her pleased grin.

Her joy at Mike potentially liking her just as much as she liked him made El nervous and giddy all at once. But it only made her more anxious about making a good first impression on his friends, wanting them to like her and hopefully accept her for who she was.

When the cake was finished Joyce stored it away and declined El's offer of cleaning up. "No don't worry about it honey, you go and hang out with the boys."

El wandered back into the living room to see Mike and Will sitting at the table that they had pulled into the middle of the room. There was a strange board in the middle of the hard-wooden surface with little figurines plastered about.

"Is this D&D?" El asked curiously, causing Mike to quickly look up from a large black book he had set in front of him.

"Yeah," he said breathlessly, his hitched voice making butterflies erupt into El's stomach, especially when it was accompanied with a heart melting smile. "Do you want to sit by me and I can tell you about the campaign?" Mike added hopefully whilst Will looked away trying to contain his smile.

"Yes," El grinned in response, immediately taking the seat to Mike's right and scooting the chair closer so she could look intensely at his scrawled writing. She didn't notice his red blotchy cheeks or hear how fast his heart was racing as he cleared his throat and started to explain what he had planned for the D&D game and how it worked.

Will helped Joyce set out snacks and drinks for the party whilst Mike and El were immersed in D&D. Mike eagerly explaining the rules of the game with the enthusiasm of a child whilst El was captivated by his voice, smile and eyes. How he seemed to talk more quickly when he was excited about something, similar to when he was nervous. How his eyes had lit up and how his smile was happy and innocent. El loved it.

After a while there was muffled voices coming from outside and the sound of footsteps on the old porch before there was loud knocking at the door. "Joyce! Will! Let us in! It's freaking *freezing* out here!"

Mike and Will laughed and Joyce chuckled as she hurried to the front door. Even El was smiling because she recognised the voice of Dustin who she had met in the early hours of the morning. She wondered if he was going to be as funny about seeing her as he was before.

El could just faintly catch two other voices, one of them bickering with Dustin before Joyce opened the door. "Come in you three, I can't have any of you freezing to death on my conscience." She teased as she ushered them in.

"It's definitely going to snow out there," came a deeper male's voice just as a dark skinned tall man came into view. He was rubbing his gloved hands together and shuddering slightly from the cold.

"No shit sherlock," Dustin responded rolling his eyes as he stepped over the threshold. "You don't have to be a genius to know *that*."

"Eurgh will you two wastoids just shut up for once? I've been hearing you two talking shit for the entire walk over here." Came a third female voice that immediately had El confused before she came into view. Her red hair looked slightly windswept, but it was mostly kept in place by the woollen hat she was wearing. She shook it off along with her coat whilst El sat at the table in shock staring at the red head.

Mike cleared his throat, getting up from the table but stayed next to El protectively. "Guys," he said making the three new additions turn their heads in the direction of the table. He exhaled deeply and smiled at El, gesturing his hand slightly to her. "This is – "

"El?!" Max gasped in surprise, her blue eyes displaying shock and then confusion. Everyone else looked between El and Max in bewilderment whilst the two girls stared at one another.

"Hi Max," El said with a sheepish smile, blood rushing to her cheeks and highlighting a blush when she remembered everything she had told the redhead about the boy she liked and how she wanted to kiss him. Never could she have imagined that Max would know *exactly* who she was swooning over.

But Max did know, and her shocked expression soon turned into a teasing smirk as her blue sharp eyes flickered from El to Mike and then back to El who was now awkwardly looking away.

"How do you two know each other?" Mike asked in amazement as he stared between his red headed friend and El who was not really *just* a friend, more like his girlfriend, but *not* his girlfriend. It was all very confusing.

When El said nothing, still too concerned that Max would out her and tell Mike that she thought he was the sweetest man she'd ever met and how cute, kind and handsome he was. Not to mention the fact that she had admitted to Max just how crazy she was about him.

"Just from the store," the red head answered smiling innocently. "El comes in all the time so we've become friends."

El looked up at Max and gave her what she hoped was a grateful

smile at not letting slip how they had been discussing how she practically melted anytime she spoke about Mike and that the red head had helped her pick an outfit especially for the movie marathon.

"Yeah Max let me keep my favourite videos from her store," El added giving her only female friend a big grin, still feeling beyond happy that she now had a permanent copy of *'The Little Mermaid'* and *'Beauty and the Beast'*.

"Won't your step dad be pissed for doing that?" the dark-skinned boy asked, a deep set frown on his brow as he looked at Max. El realised that he *had* to be Lucas considering the red head had spoken about her boyfriend and El had already met Will and Dustin.

Max rolled her eyes, "as if I give a shit about what my step dad thinks."

"He is an ass hole." Joyce agreed with a nod of her head that made Will and Mike smirk. "Anyway," she said clapping her hands together. "I'll leave you to your games and I'll be in my room with the TV and a bottle of wine if anyone needs me." Joyce waved over her shoulder to the young adults before heading to the kitchen to grab a wine glass and her bottle from the fridge.

"My mother ladies and gentlemen," Will teased whilst the others laughed. There was silence for a moment, no one knowing what to say about the fact that El with super powers was sat at the D&D table and even more bizarrely, her and Max already knew each other.

"So El *you're* the girl who has powers? Why didn't you tell me?!" The red head said abruptly, but not in anger. She just seemed frustrated as if she was the last person in on a secret.

El shrugged, "sorry Max, I didn't realise you knew Mike." She explained as the red head, Dustin and Lucas came over to the table.

"To be fair, if I met me, I wouldn't think I hung out with a bunch of nerds either." Max said fairly, ignoring the shouts of indignation from the boys. "This is Lucas by the way, my boy toy." She teased gesturing to the boy who took a seat on her left.

"Hey El," he said with a grin. "It's nice to finally meet you. Mike talks about you *all the* - "

"Okay!" Mike shouted, his hands up in surrender and his face flustered. "Can everyone *stop* making me sound like a creep?!"

El giggled and the others laughed, all of them teasing Mike who was bright red when Dustin said, "well you *were* trying to stalk her. But you were like the worst stalker ever because you didn't know where the hell she was."

Mike huffed in indignation, his face practically on fire now. "I wasn't stalking her! I just wanted to see her..." he clearly realised what he said was even worse because his friends barked with laughter while Mike dropped his boiling hot face into his sweaty palms.

El chuckled at him, her eyes warm and loving as she reached over under the table and placed her hand on his knee. Mike immediately brought his head up and caught her gaze, his eyes wide with surprise before a dopey grin slowly erupted onto his face. El kept her hand on his knee throughout the game and she didn't know whose heart was racing more.

Dungeons and Dragons was more fascinating than El could have expected and she found herself completely consumed by the story that Mike set out, how captivating he was as the Dungeon Master and the control that he had over the game. El watched him closely more than the game, loving the glint of mischief in his eyes as the campaign involved twists and turns, constantly keeping the party in suspense.

Another thing El learnt about D&D was how long it took. Whilst being entranced by the game she didn't realise the clock was ticking, nor did she notice it when they stopped to eat, laughing and joking as they ate the tough pasta Joyce cooked them whilst Will mumbled that his mom's cooking skills were *very* different from her baking skills.

It was way past midnight when the campaign finally ended, and the party were rewarded by a King for their bravery. El smiled around at the group as they bickered with Mike that the campaign had been

way too short whilst he argued exasperatedly, "it was *ten hours!*"

At his words El looked at the clock shocked to see it was past 1am, the hands of the clock taunting and reminding her that she was going to be in a lot of trouble when she finally got back to the warehouse.

"I've got to go." El said breathlessly more to herself than the others. But at her outbreak the party members stopped their squabbling and turned to her in surprise.

"Really?" Mike asked quietly, his eyes sad and disappointed.

"You can stay here tonight El, we're having a sleepover anyway." Will added kindly, giving her a gentle smile.

"Yeah stay El!" Dustin said brightly, still not completely over his fangirling.

"You can't go out there this late," Lucas looked concerned. "There's weirdos out at this time of night. It's not safe."

"We're not doubting that you can't look after yourself," Max said quickly when it was obvious El was about to explain that her powers kept her out of harm's way. "But it would be cool if you could stay. For one it's really nice having another girl around and second of all it's Wheeler's birthday." The red head added, her eyes wide and knowing as she glanced at Mike who had a desperate hope in his eyes before looking back at El.

She swallowed anxiously, knowing that Kali was going to be mad at her anyway for being out so late after she told her that it wouldn't happen again. What was a few more hours? She could just leave really early.

"Okay," El finally blurted out, smiling bashfully when the party cheered and clapped, and Mike beamed at her. She met his dark starry eyes and blushed, so overwhelmed by his gaze that she forgot the practicalities for a moment before reality set back in.

"I don't have pyjamas with me," El confessed feeling slightly embarrassed. "Or a sleeping bag."

"That's okay," Will said coming up with a solution. "I know we have a spare sleeping bag around here somewhere that my brother Jonathan used to use. And you can always borrow something off my mom – "

"Or you can have my shirt if you want." Mike blurted out, his eyes wide with surprise at his words, especially when the whole party looked at him in amusement. "Er...I m-meant, you can like use my shirt because I have another one to sleep in."

El couldn't help but blush too, the idea of being enveloped in Mike's shirt, that smelt like him and that he had worn was more thrilling than she could explain. "Okay," she answered breathlessly, not taking her eyes off him.

The party rearranged the living room to lay out their sleeping bags whilst Joyce found El a pair of pyjamas bottoms. After Mike had changed in the bathroom he shyly handed El his shirt which was still warm, and she was able to hide her gleeful smile by hurrying into the bathroom that he had just vacated.

Once his shirt was covering her upper body and falling to her thighs in length, she lifted the collar and gave it a sniff, feeling embarrassed but comforted when she inhaled Mike's scent. El sighed happily and exited the bathroom so that Max could change.

She only got out of the door way before she was ambushed by the red head who ushered her back into the bathroom and closed the door. El knew immediately what this was going to be about and quickly averted her eyes.

"Oh my *freaking* god," Max exclaimed throwing her hands up in the air. "*Wheeler?! You're crazy about Michael Wheeler?!'*" The red head chuckled to herself and shook her head in amazement. "I never thought this day would come. I thought he was going to *die* a virgin..."

El blushed bright red at Max's outburst, especially over her confession about Mike's sexual life. She couldn't help but be secretly pleased that no other girl had got to experience intimacy in that way with Mike. And while El didn't know a lot about sex, she knew enough. She did read Cosmopolitan after all...

"Does this mean that Mike hasn't got a lot of experience kissing?" El asked breathlessly, too curious to allow herself to be embarrassed by her question.

Max snorted in amusement, "trust me, I think he has kissed two girls in his whole life and I don't even think either of them were with tongue. So, you're on a pretty level playing field."

El practically *beamed* with relief, her worries over Mike's experiences being so different to hers slowly ebbing away. She suddenly wasn't so scared to try and push the boundaries of their friendship.

"I'm thinking we should put El's sleeping bag right here..." Dustin said teasingly as he moved the blue soft mattress bag along so it was touching Mike's black one.

Mike sighed in exasperation while the boys sniggered and pushed his own sleeping bag slightly to the left so there was at least a gap between his and El's, even if it was small. He wasn't going to lie, *of course* he wanted to sleep next to her, but he didn't want her to feel uncomfortable either, and if she preferred to move her sleeping bag by Max then he would understand.

"Hey Will, why don't you let Mike and El have your bed for the night?" Lucas joked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. "It is his twenty-first birthday after all..."

"Eurgh gross," Will shuddered whilst Mike attacked Lucas with sofa cushions. "*No one* is having sex in my bed."

"Aw bad luck Paladin," Dustin joined in the goading making Mike throw a pillow at him too.

"Me and El are *not* having sex," he practically hissed in anger and embarrassment. "Just drop it okay?" he told them in a hushed whisper when they heard the bathroom door open and El and Max's footsteps.

The boys obediently dropped the topic, but Mike still felt himself going red when he saw El, loving the way she looked in his shirt. The

fact that it was against her bare skin was making his own skin burn with heat and he had to excuse himself to the kitchen where he quickly downed a pint of water. He shook his head, hoping to clear his thoughts and get some sense back into his brain.

He was secretly relieved to see that El didn't move her sleeping bag even when Will explained to her where everyone was sleeping. In fact, she seemed to be relieved that Mike was next to her, giving him a shy smile that made his heart flutter madly.

Everyone got into their sleeping bags, laughing and talking for another 30 minutes before they all started to drift to sleep. Will was first, then Dustin, Lucas, Max and Mike. But he was having trouble sleeping, hyperaware of El and every time she moved in her sleeping bag.

After another five minutes Mike turned on his side, so he was facing El's direction. "Are you okay?" he whispered to her in the dark, it had just started snowing outside and the illuminated brightness of the sky shed a small amount of light into the living room. Mike could make out El's silhouette and when he really focused he could see her face, she looked worried.

El seemed startled by his question but she turned on her side too, so that they could look at each other easier. She didn't say anything for a while and Mike's question hung in the air between them until she sighed quietly.

"I find it hard to get to sleep sometimes because I'm scared to dream..."

"Why?" he asked her softly, his voice quiet and calming but his brow furrowed in concern for her.

El's eyes flickered over his for a moment, "I have nightmares...almost every night. About the lab, about...about the man who called himself my papa."

Mike gulped, his heart racing at the thought of having frequent nightmares, but it was even worse for El who wasn't just having nightmares of ghosts or stupid things, hers were flashbacks. Things

that had actually happened to her and now she was having to relive them in her unconscious mind.

"Is there anything that helps to stop the nightmares?" Mike whispered, his eyes fixed on El's.

She seemed to ponder this for a moment, her hazel eyes glazing over, deep in thought. "There was one night when I didn't have nightmares..."

Mike didn't say anything and waited patiently for her to continue. In the darkness, even with the highlight of the flurrying heavy snow brightening the room, he couldn't distinguish the pink blush that was appearing on El's cheeks.

"It was the night I visited you in the void Mike." She finally admitted, her voice vulnerable and quiet.

Mike blinked, surprised by her answer, his heart in his throat. "And w-why..." He cleared his throat and tried again. "And why do you think that stopped the nightmares?" His voice was slightly shaky, but he tried to be as quiet as possible, not wanting the others to wake up and hear this. It felt like a very private moment between the two of them.

El maintained her gaze with Mike's, their eyes connected, not just physically but emotionally. He felt like he could almost hear her heart racing as fast as his own.

"Because you make me feel safe Mike." El finally whispered.

Mike reached for her hand, finding it in the small space between their sleeping bags. Their fingers laced together, fitting perfectly. There was so much he wanted to say to her, so much he wanted to express, but he couldn't be sure that the others were definitely asleep.

He smiled softly, his eyes wandering over El's beautiful face as his thumb stroked slowly over the back of her hand. "I will *always* keep you safe El. I *promise*."

El eyes widened in surprise and a smile crept onto her lips as she stared back at him. She squeezed his hand and snuggled forever into

her pillow, keeping her eyes on his until she was finally pulled into a slumber.

Mike watched over her for a long time, hoping she was having good dreams. He could only fall into his own sleep when he watched a grin flicker on her face whilst she slept. Feeling reassured she was okay, Mike allowed himself to shut his heavy eyes.

Sunday 26th January 1992

Mike was in the space between dreaming and consciousness. He could hear distance voices, hushed sniggers and laughter and he frowned, groaning slightly as he pulled the warm pillow that was already next to him closer to his body. He snuggled further into it, but the distant laughter only seemed to get closer.

His eyelids started to flicker, bleary eyes trying to blink and focus, coming back to reality. "Wha's going on?" Mike mumbled quietly, content to fall back asleep with this warm pillow by his side.

"This is the best thing I've ever seen," Lucas sniggered.

"Leave them alone," Max whispered, but her grin was evident.

"Quick Will get a photo before Mike wakes up," Dustin whispered between his laughter.

The snap of a camera was what made Mike open his eyes in confusion. But it wasn't a flash or a lens that caught his gaze, in fact he was too consumed by the fact that his forehead was against El's and his nose and hers were inches from each other whilst his arm was wrapped around her waist whilst hers was flung over his chest.

Mike blinked in a panic and hurried to put a bit of distance between them whilst his friends sniggered and tried desperately to contain their laughter whilst El slept soundly. However, at Mike's hurried movements her own eyelashes fluttered, and she slowly opened her eyes. By that point there was a significant gap between them and he tried to pretend that he hadn't just been cuddling her in his sleep.

"M-Morning," Mike croaked to El as she stretched her arms above her

head, oblivious to the rest of the party watching them avidly, highly entertained by their cuddling session.

"Good morning," El said smiling at him slightly before she turned to look at the others who were now averting their eyes and containing their grins. "Morning," she added politely before they all greeted her in return.

El turned to Mike, a soft smile on her face while the other party members mumbled about grabbing breakfast and hurried to the kitchen where Joyce was already scrambling eggs.

"What was that about?" El giggled, a small bemused smile on her face as she watched the party scurrying away.

"Oh nothing," Mike said as nonchalantly as he could as he cleared his throat and sat up, the sleeping bag feeling tight against his legs. "Did you sleep okay?" he asked her, allowing his embarrassment at cuddling her without her knowledge to slip away as he felt the same protectiveness from last night coming back.

"I have never slept better," El admitted with a shy smile as she averted her eyes. "I didn't have one nightmare."

"Maybe I'm your lucky charm," Mike teased, trying to ease the tension in his heart to just kiss her by making a joke which only made him feel more bashful and awkward.

"Maybe..." El whispered softly, looking up at Mike, their gazes locking before they both smiled shyly. They both jumped when Joyce called them in for breakfast and hurried to their feet to join the others.

Before Mike could head to the kitchen El grabbed his hand, "Mike?"

"Y-Yeah?" he asked sheepishly, looking back at her, his gaze dancing across her beautiful face.

"Happy birthday," she said with a sweet smile that warmed his heart and made his stomach explode with butterflies. He could only grin foolishly as she giggled and pulled him along to the kitchen.

It turned out that the flurry of icy particles in the middle of the night had caused a vast blanket of snow to cover most of Chicago. And while there was the sound of snow shovels out in the street and the grumbles of neighbours trying to unearth their cars, there was only childish excitement happening in the Byers household.

"We *need* to have a snow ball fight!" Max was saying breathlessly, her enthusiasm heightened at the idea of getting to chuck frozen ice at her friends. She was the most athletic out of all of the boys and so to her this was the main reason *why* a snow ball fight was so appealing.

"A snow ball fight?" El whispered to Mike in confusion. He turned to her in surprise, shocked that she had never got to experience the fun aspects to winter and then immediately angry at the things she had been forced to miss out on.

"It's fun," he insisted with a warm smile, determined to make this as good of an experience as possible. "You form the snow into a ball shape and run around throwing it at each other. Like in *Beauty and the Beast* when they try to hit each other in the face." Mike realised that didn't sound exactly appealing but El chuckled in surprise all the same.

Before Joyce would allow any of the party in the back yard to play in the snow, she insisted that they were all appropriately dressed. She borrowed El a coat and gloves whilst Mike gave her his beanie hat, insisting that his mop of dark hair would keep his ears warm. He loved seeing her pleased grin when she tucked the hat over her curly brown locks.

Mike watched as El's hazel eyes widened with wonder as they stepped into the back yard which looked like an untouched winter wonderland. That was until Dustin, Lucas, Max and Will rushed forward, their footprints sticking in the fluffy snow as they yelled and laughed, quickly patting the snow into snow balls.

"It is like *Beauty and the Beast*," El gasped with an amazed look on her face as she watched the party having fun.

His dark eyes gazed at El and he grinned adoringly, "come on. Let's join them." Mike held out his hand and El turned to him, glowing

with excitement as she clasped his glove covered hand and let him run with her, trying to find them cover before they could make their own snow balls and join the fight.

Mike was hit more times than he could count, his clothes dusted in snow because of how distracted he was with staring at El. He couldn't help it, he was absolutely captivated by how much fun she was having. She was laughing and fully involved in the game, running around the yard throwing snow balls at any chance she got, narrowly avoiding being hit by most of them.

Mike beamed with happiness knowing this was the best birthday of his life. He tried to pay attention to the game as much as he could, feeling slightly disappointed when they stopped to drink hot cocoa until he noticed that El's button nose was tinged red from the cold and it was the most adorable thing Mike had *ever* seen. She caught his gaze over the steaming mugs of chocolate and grinned knowingly, both of them blushing and smiling foolishly.

"We should make a snow man next," Mike said to El, grinning even wider when he saw the amazement in her eyes as she nodded her head intently.

The rest of the party carried on with their snow ball fight, leaving a distance between Mike and El to give them some alone time. They found an area near the back of the yard where the snow lay untouched and Mike showed El how to start scooping up the snow and rolling it along so it became more compact and bigger. It formed the bottom circle of their snow man as they worked together to make the middle and finally the top.

El had fun routing around the garden searching for twigs and small stones to decorate their snow man. "What should we call him?" she shouted from across the yard walking back to Mike with a carrot in her hand that Joyce had just donated for the cause. The rest of the party had hurried inside for some lunch.

Mike looked at the snow man that was complete except for its nose. "Whatever you want," he said back to El, smiling softly when she joined him and pushed the carrot into the centre of the snow man's face.

El appraised the snow man and grinned, "Eggo," she said with a stern finality that made Mike laugh before she joined in, her eyes sparkling.

They both looked at each other, stood in front of their snow man proudly. Their eyes lingered on each other, their gaze saying so much in the moment as the snow fell gracefully around them.

Mike could see the fun El had, the childlike and innocent excitement she got to experience that day beaming through her features. And then there was the softer side of her, the glint in her eyes when she looked at him. *Only* him. The depth of her pupils staring into Mike's, the hitches in her breaths when they didn't look away and the glow of her beauty shining from her pure soul as they moved closer to one another.

Mike gulped, the moment felt intense and *important*. He knew in his heart that this was it.

He slowly lifted his hand up to her cold cheek, basking in her beauty as her lips parted slightly, her eyes wide and dare he say *loving* as she stared back at him, completely captivated.

The cold air and the fluttering of snow falling onto their cheeks and settling on their clothing no longer mattered as the gap between them grew shorter and shorter.

El's breath was warm on Mike's face, a gasp of anticipation hitting his mouth as he closed his eyes and felt her eyelashes flicker down on his cheeks as he just went with his instinct, finally, *finally* kissing El like he had been dreaming of.

Their lips only brushed together at first, delicate and soft, testing the waters. El whimpered, the vibration of the sound tickling Mike's mouth and causing him to smile into the kiss. He kept his hand on her cheek as he put more pressure into the kiss, feeling El respond not only with her lips.

Her hands moved to his shoulders, gripping his coat and holding him in place before her arms wrapped around his neck. El moved onto her tip toes causing Mike to not need to lean down as much. His free

hand went to her waist and he pulled her closer, his heart exploding with so much happiness and love that he suddenly realised that maybe those magical Disney kisses *could* be real. Because there was nothing else to describe this kiss than magical.

Their lips finally parted from one another, oxygen a necessity after a while even though Mike felt he could have survived solely on kissing El for the rest of his life. Their foreheads touched and they both stared at each other with matching blissful grins.

"I've wanted to do that for so long," Mike admitted breathlessly, laughing softly because he was so incredibly overwhelmed.

El giggled too, her smile blindingly beautiful. "Me too." She sighed happily, brushing her nose against Mike's and making him beam with happiness.

"Was it like a Disney kiss?" he couldn't help but tease, feeling so elated, like he could do *anything*.

El grinned and stared straight into Mike's eyes, her gaze so warm. Her arms were still wrapped around his neck and her hands moved to the back of his head, her fingers weaving into his hair as she pulled him down and kissed him again.

Mike immediately kissed her back, tilting his head slightly to deepen the kiss and overwhelm his senses with El and nothing but El. After a while she pulled back, both of their chests heaving as they tried to catch their breath.

She looked up at him and giggled softly. "*Much* better than a Disney kiss."

AN: Okay I really loved writing that :-)

I *really* hope you enjoyed it, pretty please let me know what you thought!

8. Wishes and Lies

Part of Your World

AN: And we're back with another chapter! And I just want to thank everyone for the reviews, kudos and favourites! It is honestly the nicest compliment *ever* so thank you. And thank you to the guest reviewers too, because I never get to tell you personally :-)

Chapter 8: Wishes and Lies

Sunday 26th January 1992

The kitchen was dimly lit by the warmth of the 21 candles pressed into the chocolate cake that El was carefully holding. The party and Joyce were singing the happy birthday tune as Mike stood next to the table, his palms clutched onto the top of the chair in front of him as he watched El move closer.

El's heart was fluttering and she was glad she didn't know the song the others were singing because she surely would have messed up by now, too consumed by Mike's dark gaze. Her lips were still tingling from the kiss they had shared only 15 minutes earlier.

She carefully placed the cake on the table in front of Mike, both of them sharing a warm smile before he bent down slightly towards the flickering candles.

"Make a wish!" Joyce called from where she was leaning against the counter next to Will.

Mike's eyes slowly left the candles and moved up until they connected with El's. She gasped quietly, her heart racing as she watched the reflection of the small flames shimmering in his eyes before he took a deep breath and extinguished the small candles whilst making his wish.

Everyone cheered and clapped, El giggling as she joined in, feeling more complete than she had ever felt in her life surrounded by these

wonderful people who had already left an imprint on her heart.

"One guess for what Mike was wishing for!" Dustin teased, his eyebrows wiggling suggestively whilst Lucas and Will sniggered, and Max and Joyce rolled their eyes.

Before a red-faced Mike could respond, El looked at the handsome man in question. "What did you wish for?" she asked him curiously.

The party all chuckled at El's innocence and Mike gulped, his Adam's apple bobbing for a moment before a sheepish grin took over his face as he stared at her. "If I tell anyone what I wished for then it won't come true."

"And believe me, he *wants* this wish to come true – "

"Lucas!" Mike barked in retaliation whilst his friends all laughed, El merely smiled from the amusement that was trilling around her body at Mike's obvious embarrassment.

"Okay, okay break it up," Joyce reprimanded the taunting boys good heartedly. "Let's all have a piece of cake and calm down."

Lucas and Dustin in particular were still smirking but they didn't dare to take on Joyce. She might have been small, but she had a strength and a mother's wrath that couldn't be questioned or defeated.

Everyone calmed down enough to enjoy some cake, all of them squished around the small kitchen table, elbows knocking against elbows. Not that El minded of course. Her leg was pressed up against Mike's and she couldn't pretend that it wasn't sending shivers up and down her spine. She smiled to herself, trying to keep her gaze on the chocolate cake.

"You decorated the cake really well," Mike said quietly, hoping the words would reach El only. She looked up at him, her cheeks blushing when she caught the sparkle in his eyes and the soft smile on his face. She would be happy to melt right into him.

"It was fun," El answered, her tone equally as quiet as his but filled with a breathlessness that had everything to do with how quickly her heart was racing. "I wanted it to look good for you."

Mike swallowed slowly at her words and his smile only seemed to widen. "Thank you," he replied in a slightly croaky voice.

El grinned back, not even caring about how her cheeks were starting to ache. "You're welcome." She whispered back, suddenly consumed with the need to kiss Mike again. To feel his soft and pliant lips against her own, to breathe him in and feel consumed by –

"So El, where do you live exactly?" Lucas asked curiously, breaking through El's current train of thought.

His question was simple but in that moment reality flooded back into El's being like a tidal wave. Her eyes widened, and her heart started to pace dangerously when she realised that Kali and the whole gang would be waiting for her. Never before had she stayed somewhere else for the night, her palms started to sweat when she thought about the panic that her sister was undoubtedly going through.

El stood up, the chair making a loud scrapping noise as she pushed away from the table. Her eyes immediately went to Mike's confused dark orbs. "I...I have to go home." She explained, her throat tight with anxiety.

"Oh," Mike exhaled through a shaky breath, his eyes widening with apprehension as he looked back up at El.

"My sister...I didn't tell her I would be out all night and she will be worried." El said quickly as Mike stood up too, the rest of the party and Joyce watching on.

El could see the disappointment in Mike's eyes, but he quickly masked it, nodding his head in acceptance. "I understand," he said quietly giving her a small comforting smile. Mike took a deep breath and reached for El's hand. "I would really like to walk you home though."

She looked down at their joined hands, conflicting emotions playing in her mind. She loved the idea of getting to walk alone with Mike for another hour, but she also didn't want him to get too near to the warehouse, it was dangerous on that part of town. Not to mention that if Kali or any of the gang saw Mike, she couldn't be sure he

would come out unscathed.

"How about you walk me back to the campus?" El finally reasoned, hoping that a compromise would work out best. She saw the debating emotions in Mike's eyes before they slowly settled down. He exhaled deeply and smiled at her sheepishly, nodding his head in agreement.

El spent the next few minutes saying good bye to the party, initially surprised by the hugs she received from the people she hardly knew but sinking happily into each one. She discovered that apart from Mike, Dustin gave the best hugs. Joyce's embraces were something else, making a choke want to be released from El's chest when she wondered if this is what being held by a mother was meant to feel like.

"Remember honey, you're welcome here *anytime*." Joyce said softly to El as they slowly pulled out of each other's arms.

"Thank you," El croaked, having the sudden urge to stay in this house and never leave. The neighbourhood wasn't exactly the most promising that Chicago had to offer, but the house was something different. It was warm, comfy, safe and in a way familiar.

"Come visit me at the store okay?" Max repeated for the third time in the last 5 minutes making El chuckle as she nodded her head in agreement.

"I will, I promise." She assured the red head who smiled in relief and clutched onto Lucas's hand.

El looked around at the group and sighed heavily, not wanting to leave but knowing it was now or never. "I will see you all soon. Thank you for such a nice time."

They all bade her goodbye and El turned to Mike immediately seeing his forlorn expression before he quickly hid it with a smile. He offered out his gloved hand and El took it immediately.

She was dressed in Mike's winter coat, borrowed gloves from Joyce and Mike's beanie hat. El loved being surrounded by his scent and his warmth, even through their gloves she could feel his body heat

filtering into the tips of her fingers.

They walked in silence for a moment, their hands swinging together, keeping the chill away from their bodies as they moved slowly towards the University of Chicago.

"Mike?" El asked quietly just as they turned down the next avenue. The tall dark-haired boy turned his head to look at her and her heart immediately swooned at just how handsome he was. She didn't think she would ever get over it.

"Yeah El?" he replied, his voice soft and intrigued.

"I'm sorry I didn't get you a birthday present. I didn't really have any time," El admitted with a slight shrug of her thin shoulders.

Mike blinked in surprise but then laughed slightly shaking his head in amusement. "Having you here with me this weekend was my present." He answered with a mischievous smile. There was a twinkle in his eyes that El was about to question when he spoke up boldly. "Besides, that kiss was like an additional gift."

El stopped walking, making Mike come to a halt as well due to their locked fingers. She looked up at him, taking in his playful smirk before a teasing grin of her own curved her lips. "Do you think we only kissed *because* it was your birthday?"

Mike's delicious cheek bones filled with colour and he looked down at the ground, his previous teasing becoming something more vulnerable. When he looked back up at El his eyes had softened. "I *hope* it was more than a birthday kiss." He admitted sheepishly.

El couldn't help but smile as she wrapped her arms around Mike's neck suddenly and lifted herself onto her tiptoes. She closed her eyes and leaned into him, their lips connecting almost immediately.

It wasn't just their first kiss that felt magical, it seemed that every kiss was going to feel like this. Like there was an electricity fizzing through their bodies, making their hearts pound, making their skin tingle and their brains dizzy with love that they were yet to admit to one another.

Their lips moved together in a perfect harmony and when Mike tilted his head slightly to the right and deepened the kiss, a whimper escaped from El's throat as he pulled her lower lip between his. Mike groaned in response and she felt a deep warmth sink lower into her abdomen. It was a feeling she had never felt before, but it was making her blood boil as she clutched onto Mike and pulled herself closer to his body.

Eventually they pulled away, both remembering they were out in public when the hustle and bustle of Chicago returned to their ears. Even through the heavy snow storm the city was fully functioning; car horns beeping, people shouting, the generators fuelling the stores on full speed.

El rested her forehead against Mike's and felt his smile ghosting over her mouth. She closed her eyes, breathing him in and instantly felt a warmth fill her chest at not just his closeness but what he represented to her. Happiness. Life. Laughter. Love. *Home*.

Her eyelashes fluttered open and her gaze immediately locked with Mike's, for he had already been staring at her, his eyes so full of a complexity of emotions that El wanted to spend time understanding each one.

"It was *so much* more than a birthday kiss Mike," El whispered, the vapor of her breath mixing with Mike's and tickling their skin. "I would have kissed you even if it wasn't your birthday."

She had no idea where her bravery was coming from, but El decided to run with it. "I *really* like you Mike," she added breathlessly, her eyes widening as she took him in and waited for his response.

Mike's eyes filled with adoration, it was so bright that it was practically blinding. A big grin erupted onto his red lips and he sighed in relief. "I really like you too El. I mean *really, really* like you. You are incredible."

El couldn't help but giggle at how adorable Mike was being and she certainly couldn't help the pink blush in her cold cheeks as she allowed his words to reach her heart. It didn't even feel like butterflies in her stomach anymore, it was more like hummingbirds.

Their wings flapping madly and making her feel faint with glee.

"You're incredible too." El said with a coy smile as she watched surprise fill Mike's features for a moment.

"I'm incredible?!" He croaked in disbelief. "Me? As in Michael Wheeler? Clumsy, socially awkward nerd?"

"Yes *that* Michael Wheeler." El teased making them both chuckle, their chests brushing together as their laughter shook their bodies in mirth. "Besides I like you being clumsy and falling over..." El added with a warm smile. "It means you will always need me to help you back up."

Mike's mouth opened slightly in awe of her words before his lips quirked into a happy and goofy smile. "I will *always* need you. That I can promise you." They both stared at each other for a moment, his words resonating something deeper with them both before their lips were back on each other. This kiss wasn't as gentle, their lips firmer as they pressed and moved together.

El's heart was pounding once again and her fingers curled into the material of Mike's hoodie as she pulled him down to be closer. His palms were against her coat covered waist but the sensation of his hands touching the curve of her body was still making fireworks explode behind her eyelids.

They could have stayed like that all day if it wasn't for a questionable looking man knocking past them and shouting, "get a room!" in a slurred voice. El broke from the kiss abruptly and looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes narrowing so that the man fell face forward into the thick powdery snow.

Mike laughed in astonishment at El's powers as the drunk man shook his shaggy grey hair, the snow appearing to sober him up as he stumbled to his feet and kept on walking with slightly more alertness to his demeanour than before.

"You really *are* a badass." Mike teased taking her hand in his again, his gloved thumb stroking against the knitted wool covering her own hand.

El shrugged, trying not to look too proud as they carried on down the snowy path. "He shouldn't have interrupted our kiss." She said sniffing and lifting her chin slightly, making Mike grin.

"You're right." Mike said trying to sound solemn but the twitching at the corners of his mouth were giving away his glee. "I think we need to kiss again, you know to get through the trauma of being stopped?"

Laughter burst out of El's chest and she felt like she was glowing from the happiness that Mike was radiating from her. "Hmm, I think you just want to kiss me again." She teased back arching her eyebrow playfully at him.

Mike's dark eyes were filled with humour but also something else El couldn't distinguish as his palms moved to her waist again and he pulled her closer. He leaned down so that his lips brushed against El's ear as a rush of desire slipped slowly down her stomach. "And if I do want to kiss you again, what are you going to do about it?" his voice was playful but El's pupils widened of their own accord, her body acting on instinct to his whispered words.

Her hands immediately moved to Mike's cheeks, bringing his lips crushing to hers. She hummed in relief at being connected to him once more and his answering groan was enough to make her feel dizzy. His arms wrapped around her body, encircling her in safety and warmth as their lips pulled, tugged and tasted one another.

This time their kiss came to a natural end and they walked hand in hand, both of them sharing giddy and coy glances and smiles as they basked in the alone time they had together. But nothing can last forever, and sooner than either of them would have liked, they reached the college campus.

"So," Mike said clearly stalling as he looked down at their entwined hands. "Are you *sure* I can't walk you home?"

El sighed heavily, also looking at how perfectly their fingers locked together like a jigsaw piece. "I would *love* you to Mike. But Kali... she's protective and I know she's going to be mad at me anyway. I told her I wouldn't be home late and..." She said quietly guilt immediately seeping into her body.

"And you stayed out all night." Mike finished for her, a sad frown on his face as he understood her dilemma. "I can understand if she's upset El, but...she's not your parent. You don't need her permission to do *anything*."

El pursed her lips and looked up at Mike, meeting his conflicted expression. She knew he understood that the situation was very different from your average sisters living together, but she could also see his frustrations. The big part of him that just wanted her to be free of her binds, but it wasn't that simple.

"I guess she has always had to be my parent, especially after we escaped the lab. I wouldn't be here today if I wasn't for her." El admitted with a sheepish shrug. She knew that Kali could be extreme, but it was all down to the lives they had led. Everything that had happened because of the lab had merged into their personality, shaping them as people for better or worse.

El watched Mike's eyes, the sorrow there and the pain. "I understand if this is all too crazy for you," she said trying to smile understandingly while it felt like ice shards were stabbing into her heart. How could she think such an amazing man, her personal Disney prince would ever want a part in *this*?

Mike blinked in surprise, his eyes widening as he immediately shook his head and spluttered for words. "N-No! It's not *that*. Not at all El." His words might have been shaky, but they were resolute. He gently squeezed their joined hands and smiled softly, El sniffing as she looked into his eyes once more. "I want you El. All of you. No matter what."

A tear escaped from El's lower lashes and she gasped out a sob as Mike carefully removed the tear with his thumb before leaning down to kiss her again. This kiss was soothing and loving. It filled her heart with comfort and reminded her that Mike wasn't going anywhere. She could *feel* his commitment and care through the tenderness of his lips on hers.

I love you, her mind whispered, the words resonating and bounding off every aspect of her inner self.

He wrapped his arms around her and El snuggled into his chest, laying her head against his beating heart, allowing the steady and powerful sound to calm her. Mike was drawing comforting circles against her back as he pressed delicate kisses to her forehead.

They stayed like that for a long time, neither of them wanting to break the spell but both knowing that things with Kali and the gang were only going to get worse the longer El stayed away. Begrudgingly they kissed goodbye, with a promise from El that she would get in touch with Mike in the void as soon as she could.

Moving away from each other felt like going against nature. Like two magnets being pulled in the wrong direction. Their only solace being that they both hoped this separation wouldn't be for long.

Mike walked back to the Byer's house in a daze, almost walking into two lamp posts and tripping over the snow-covered kerb. Being separated from El felt like mental torture, all the while his body was still sparking and tingling with sensation from their kisses. Every single one was perfect and made Mike's mind dizzy with happiness, love and desire.

He couldn't wait to see her again. He never wanted to be parted in the first place but knew life didn't work that way. It wasn't like he could offer her a lot. A dorm room with him and Dustin probably wasn't her ideal scenario.

Mike walked slowly up the rickety porch steps of the Byer's house, knocking his shoes against the wooden pillar to dislodge most of the snow from his sneakers. He shuddered from the cold, not once allowing his shivers to be evident to El. He didn't want her to feel bad for having his winter jacket. In fact, he loved this new arrangement of her wearing his clothes, it caused a giddy grin to appear on his lips once more as he knocked on the front door.

Instead of being greeted by Joyce's welcoming face, Mike got a knowing smirk from Dustin. "So," his friend began teasing even before the tall Paladin could kick off his shoes. "It only takes *ten minutes* to walk to campus. Where have you been young Michael?"

"He was obviously sucking face!" Lucas called from the living room making Mike roll his eyes as he ignored both of his friends comments and made his way into the warm space, immediately falling into the nearest armchair with a sigh.

"Oh my god he's not even *denying* it!" Max chuckled from where she was sat in front of the fire, warming her hands.

"Oh come on guys, leave him alone. He's probably feeling like shit because El's gone home." Will said sympathetically.

"I knew there was a reason why you were my favourite Will," Mike mumbled before he buried his head into the cushion and let out a loud pitiful exhale.

"Rubbish," Lucas snorted as he moved from the couch and sat down next to Max by the fire. "Will's everyone's favourite because he can literally save all of our lives!"

Will laughed and rolled his eyes, "so are you all using me? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yeah I guess so," Max teased as she crawled into Lucas's lap, both her and Will pulling their tongues at each other in playful gest.

Mike removed his head from the cushion and watched for a moment as Lucas wrapped his arms around Max and nuzzled her red hair with his nose whilst she smirked and looked into the dancing flames of the fire.

"It's not fair." Mike practically whined before burying his face into the pillow again.

"Sup lover boy?" Dustin teased from the couch, throwing a few cushions at a forlorn Mike to get his attention.

"Isn't it obvious?" Joyce's voice joined the room as she walked in with a steamy mug of hot cocoa for Mike. "The poor boy is love sick."

Dustin snorted in amusement as Mike popped his head up and thanked Joyce for the mug of chocolate, cupping it in his hands and looking down at the cream and marshmallows with a sad expression.

Joyce perched herself on the arm of the chair and reached out to stroke Mike's hair in a motherly fashion. "Don't worry sweetie, she'll be back soon. I know how much she likes you."

"Did she say something to you about me?" Mike asked eagerly, the first hopeful smile on his face since he had to separate from El.

Joyce chuckled and smiled kindly at him, "I'm sorry sweetie but I can't tell you what she said. I can't betray her trust."

"Neither can I." Max piped up with a knowing grin as Mike immediately whipped his head around to look at her. The movement was so quick he was at risk of spilling hot cocoa everywhere, but the scolding would be worth it.

"What did she tell you?" Mike practically pleaded, desperate to know what El had been telling the girls about him.

"I think the better question is what has *Max* been saying about you to *El*," Lucas teased grinning against his girlfriend's shoulder as she smirked back at Mike in a way that made dread fill his stomach.

His face paled and he gulped nervously, "Max, what did you tell her?" he practically choked out.

Max appeared to be inspecting her finger nails, that same smug smirk still on her face. "Oh, not much...just told her about your um, *lack* of experience..."

Mike groaned in exasperation and hid his face once more behind the cushion whilst the boys all laughed. Joyce coughed uncomfortably and got up, "I'm just gonna..." she indicated towards the kitchen and then hurried off which Mike was thankful of. He didn't need his best friend's mom to also know he was a virgin.

"Why would you *tell* her that?!" Mike asked in a whinny and irritated voice that was muffled by the material of the frilly cushion cover.

Max shrugged, "she wanted to know, and I told her." She explained simply before adding, "I'm not about to betray El's trust but I will tell you that she was more than happy with what she heard, okay?"

Mike slowly looked up at Max, trying desperately to read through the lines. What he got from her words were that El was just as inexperienced as him. But he supposed he could have guessed as much considering she had spent the majority of her life in a lab and then three years on the run. It left little time for a love life.

Sadly he wasn't the only one to pick up on Max's subtle message and Dustin and Lucas teased him relentlessly about them both being "two cute little virgins who just needed to do it already!"

"You know what," Mike shouted as he threw the cushions back at Dustin, unable to get Lucas who was hiding behind Max. "You are both despicable and I have no idea why I'm friends with you!" Sadly his words didn't have much weight as Lucas and Dustin both boomed with laughter whilst Will sniggered and Max grinned at the foolish boys in front of her.

"So, when are you seeing El again lover boy?" The red head asked an hour later as they all helped themselves to the pizza that Joyce had ordered for them.

Mike sighed, chewing on the piece of pizza for a moment hoping to delay his response. "It depends on El," he said shrugging in what he hoped was a casual way. "Her sister's pretty protective and I don't think she's going to take kindly to El being out all night."

There was silence in the group for a moment, all of them thinking about El's family dynamic and the things she had been through.

"You should rescue her then," Will finally said with a kind smile. "Be the Disney prince character that you said she likes so much."

Mike looked at Will and smiled sheepishly, not answering but hoping the small grin would suffice. In reality he was a nervous wreck, worried about how the gang and Kali were reacting to El being away for so long. Would they keep her away from him? Did they have the power to do that? Mike swallowed thickly, the pizza suddenly feeling dry and unappealing as he felt the anxiety get to him.

But as he stared out of the window that led to the yard, his eyes lingered on the snow man they had so proudly built together. Right

there in that snow they had shared their first kiss and it had been *everything* to Mike. With a courage building in his chest and a fight in his soul, he told himself that no matter what, nothing was going to stop him from seeing El.

"Well, well, well, Shirley Temple returns!" came the condescending voice of Axel the second El trudged into the large echoed space that they used for a living room. She was quiet for a moment kicking off her soaked shoes while her heart raced with adrenaline.

On the walk back to the warehouse El had thought out a cover story for her long absence and she could only hope the gang would accept it as the truth and not question her. But it seemed her absence had caused a stir among the group.

"Where have you been?" Mick asked with concern from where she sat by one of the windows, the snow covering the ledge heavily beyond the thin glass.

"Kali's gonna kick your ass," Dottie commented in her monotone voice as she blew a large bubble with her gum and then burst it.

"Where is Kali?" El asked, her face tight with anxiety as she ignored Mick's question but looked at the woman for the answer. She didn't think she would get much out of Axel or Dottie.

"Where do you think?" Mick laughed jumping down from the window sill. "She's out looking for you with Funshine. She's convinced herself that the person stalking us got you."

El felt like she had been punched in the gut as the force of her guilt and shame hit her body with such a blow that it left her reeling. "Where did they go? I can find them and explain." She said quickly, her brow beading with sweat with the fact that her sister and Funshine were out there in the snow storm trying to find her. She felt like the worst person in the world for doing this to them so that she could enjoy some time with the boy she loved.

"Well you can explain it to them now," Dottie mumbled as she indicated her head towards the door where a small and large shadow

loomed towards the entrance. El gulped anxiously, squeezing her shaking hands into fists to try and steady herself.

Funshine opened the door, his large form hiding Kali for a moment as he stepped in and shook off his jacket. Kali came into view and El's heart immediately jumped to her throat. Her sister looked tired, worn out and worried.

"Kali," El croaked out, her eyes immediately watering as Kali looked up instantly, her own gasp leaving her throat as she locked eyes with her sister.

"Eleven!" A sob of relief broke from Kali's chest as she ran to El engulfing her immediately into a tight hug, both girls crying into each other's shoulders. Kali from relief and El from plain and utter guilt.

"Thank god," she heard Funshine sigh in relief as he came over to join the gang around the sitting area.

"Are you okay?! Did they get you?! Was it the person stalking us?!" Kali exclaimed in a panic as she pulled away enough to inspect El for any injuries. Her dark eyes flickering with confusion as she took in the winter coat, gloves and beanie that didn't belong to her sister.

"I'm f-fine," El gasped shaking with adrenaline and shame. "I wasn't taken."

Kali halted her inspection of El's clothes and moved her eyes back onto the hazel ones. "Then...where have you been?" she asked quietly, confusion and anger starting to battle it out inside of her.

"I..." El remembered the cover story she came up with and took a deep breath. "I was following leads on Brenner and strayed too far. When the snow storm hit I looked for cover and stayed at a hostel."

"Which hostel?" Axel asked, his eyebrow raised, clearly not believing a word she said.

"Field House," El answered quickly, remembering the one she had passed that day. Axel didn't respond, clearing having heard of the hostel but unable to prove if she was lying about staying there.

"We need to talk alone." Kali said abruptly, the whole gang and El turning back to look at her. The expression on her face was not one to be messed with and El solemnly nodded, wondering if she was going to have to tell her sister about Mike. She wasn't at all ashamed of him, she was just terrified that she would be forbidden from seeing him again. She couldn't risk that chance.

El followed Kali to her own room, shivering at how cold it was compared to Joyce's house. She couldn't help but wish she was there instead, kissing Mike, or snuggled up on the couch, or even helping Joyce with decorating a cake. It was almost like a different life she had lived in the last two days.

Kali sat down on El's bed and she hesitantly joined her sister, her heart practically audible as it drilled in her chest. She watched Kali who exhaled a tired sigh and ran a hand through her dark hair.

"You really scared me Eleven." She whispered through tight lips whilst El felt tears run down her own face.

"I'm so sorry," she replied in a choked voice, meaning every word of her apology for the twisted vines of lies she had found herself stuck in.

"I thought..." Kali cleared her voice and looked down at the bed, reaching for El's shaky hand. "I thought I had truly lost you."

El shook her head adamantly, "you won't lose me Kali. We're sisters, that's for life." Kali looked up at her and smiled sadly, nodding her head begrudgingly in agreement.

"You are my home Eleven. We need to stick together *always*."

El gulped, her eyes watery and unsure. *Home*. It was that word again, one she could only associate with one person and no matter how much she loved Kali, it wasn't her. That word belonged to the one who truly made her feel like herself, who made her laugh, smile and beam with more happiness than she thought she deserved. The one who made her heart race, the one who she could imagine spending forever with.

"Of course, we'll stick together," El said instead, giving her sister a small smile of reassurance. "I love you Kali." She added before leaning forward and clutching her sister in a tight embrace.

"I love you too Eleven."

It was hours later, the little bit of sunlight that had shone that day had long ago fallen beyond the horizon. It was another night of snow, the window illuminated by the sparkling ice.

El lay in her bed, the covers tucked up to her chin as she stared at her ceiling and gently ran her finger over her bottom lip, her heart fluttering when she closed her eyes and remembered the gentle pressure of Mike's mouth on hers. She smiled slowly against the tip of her finger at the memory.

He had said he wanted her, but did he realise how much she wanted him too?

El kept her eyes closed, her lids twitching slightly as she thought about Mike and only Mike, concentrating intensely on him until she opened her eyes and found herself in the void.

He was in his bed reading and on closer inspection El caught the title of the book, *'The Hobbit'*. For a moment she just stood and stared at him, smiling shyly when he slowly looked up and frowned at the space where she knew he would be seeing his dorm room in front of him instead of her.

Mike stared at the same spot for a while whilst El enjoyed taking the moment to appraise him, breathless from sharp cheek bones, red pouty lips, dark starry eyes and luscious dark locks of hair. She sighed happily and leaned forward, concentrating on bringing him into the void as she pressed her hands to his shoulders.

He startled and jumped but then blinked and was within the void with her, his body back in his dorm simple drifting into a sleep.

Mike looked up at her, his mouth gaping open in astonishment even though this wasn't his first time in the void. Clearly the awe hadn't surpassed him just yet.

"El," he breathed out happily, his eyes glowing with adoration as she giggled at his reaction and sat down on his bed next to him, pulling back his duvet and snuggling up next to him.

"Is this okay?" El whispered as she turned onto her side, facing him. She noticed how wide his eyes were, the nervous shake in his hands and the faint blush on his cheeks.

"Y-Yeah!" He gasped, throwing the book to the end of the bed and repositioning himself so he was her mirror image, facing her in the bed, the duvet up to their shoulders.

"So...how was Kali?" Mike asked quietly, his eyes flickering between her own with concern. The care so evident in his features made El smile despite the seriousness of the conversation she had with her sister.

"She was upset that I was gone," El started as the guilt riddled back into her stomach. "She thought...she thought the bad men had got me." She confessed, closing her watery eyes as she imagined if it had been the other way around. If she had been waiting at the warehouse for Kali, only for her to not return. She could only imagine the fear her sister had felt.

"I told her that I wandered too far and that I stayed in a hostel." El confessed, her heart squeezing painfully as she noticed the hurt in Mike's eyes.

"Why um, why didn't you tell her you were with me?" he asked vulnerably, his eyes looking down at his hand which was fiddling with the blanket awkwardly.

"I wanted to Mike," El said sniffing as she took a deep breath. "But I don't...she'll...she'll tell me I can't s-see you anymore."

Mike looked back up at her, a frown etched into his brow but love in his eyes that softened. He reached out and stroked El's cheek delicately, both of them just staring at each other for a moment.

"Why would she say that?" Mike asked eventually.

"Because I should be focusing on bringing down Brenner, I *need* to

focus on bringing down Brenner but...but all I can think about is you Mike." El answered breathlessly, a tear falling down her cheek. "I *always* want to be with you."

Mike smiled softly despite the gravity of the situation and shuffled forward so that their foreheads rested together. "I always want to be with you too. I think about you all the time El." He confessed, his eyes closed, his eyelashes tickling El's wet cheeks.

"What should I do Mike?" she whispered, closing her eyes too and breathing him in for a moment, allowing his natural scent to calm her racing heart and ease her worries even for a second.

"What if I could help you?" Mike finally responded causing El to open her eyes again to look at him in confusion. He stared back at her with a determination in his dark gaze. "I could help you to focus so that you can try and find Brenner. I know you said that you're worried to find him in the void. But...but if I'm with you, if I'm by your side, maybe...maybe you won't be as afraid." He whispered gently, his eyes imploring and soft now.

El stared at him, too choked to speak for a moment as she took in the gravity of his words and the implications behind them. "You would do that for me?"

Mike smiled again, this one more certain than ever before. "I would do *anything* for you El." The importance of his words were not forgotten as El gazed at him, her heart practically squealing with love. He seemed to think he might have made her uncomfortable with the intensity of his statement, so he coughed and grinned a cute boyish smile. "Besides, you did save my life, so I guess I'm in your debt?"

El laughed, the sound echoing in the void, making the space warm and light as she stared at the boy who had captured her heart. "I guess you are." She teased back.

They smiled at each other, their noses nuzzling playfully as El sighed feeling content once more. "Thank you, Mike," she whispered as she got comfortable, sliding down the bed slightly so that she could wrap her arm around his stomach and tuck her head into the curve of his

neck and shoulder.

She felt his chin prop up on top of her head of curls as his arms wrapped around her waist pulling her closer into his embrace. "What for?" he replied with curiosity.

El sighed happily as she snuggled into his hold, her nose squished up against his throat as she accepted the fact that essence of Mike would always be her favourite smell *ever*. "For everything," she answered in a soft whisper, closing her tired eyes, finally feeling safe and secure in his hold.

Mike opened his mouth to say something, three words that would change everything, but he quickly shut his mouth, too scared it was too soon to be saying what he really wanted and *needed* her to know. Instead he settled for kissing the top of her curly brown hair, smiling against the locks and whispered, "night El."

"Night Mike."

AN: Okay so now the story is really starting to begin! Thank you so much for reading and as always please let me know what you thought, your comments and feedback are everything :-)

9. Light and Dark

Part of Your World

AN: This chapter is dedicated to all the fellow writers putting themselves out there! I had my first really negative comment on the last chapter and it succeeded in knocking my confidence in my writing and my story.

Please just know that I have a plan for this story, as I do all my stories. I plan them out and research literally everything! So, I know where this story is going, and I hope it will be enjoyable but as many of my lovely readers have reminded me, I need to write the story I want before anything else. I am so thankful to have amazing people in my life that reminded me why I write :-)

Chapter 9: Light and Dark

Thursday 30th January 1992

The wind was choppy and freezing against El's skin as she bundled herself up inside of Mike's winter coat and braced herself for the icy temperatures as she walked into the centre of the city.

There was a spring in her step and the smile that she desperately tried to hide in front of Kali and the gang was able to erupt, highlighting her features and making her sigh happily. This was all Mike's doing of course.

Ever since Sunday night El had brought him into the void and they had fallen asleep together, nightmares being a thing of the past when she was safe in Mike's warm embrace.

She couldn't help but miss seeing him in real life though, the void only easing her trembling heart but not captivating it completely. She needed to truly inhale his scent, she wanted to run her fingers through his soft hair and kiss those beautiful lips. El felt herself blushing despite the cold weather, her cheeks filling with colour as she thought about the kisses they had shared so far.

Her heart began to race as the images of being held by Mike whilst his lips pulled, pressed and tugged on her own sent a shiver down her spine. El smiled to herself, as her feet pulled her along to her destination. The sound of her converses on the slushy wet snow making slapping noises on the pavement as she walked.

Mike had been in classes all week and El had taken the opportunity to stay close to Kali and the gang, wanting to appear normal and not like she was yearning for a handsome and sweet nerd. Not that it was easy of course. She went with the group to shoplift and even joined Kali on one of her visits to a man who was selling them weapons. All the while El felt a tug in her heart, a whisper telling her that it wouldn't always be like this. That she could have a different life if she wanted.

El wondered what it would be like to have a real family. To go home every day to a mother like Joyce, who was so caring and attentive. She thought about college and what she would study if she was able to go. Education wasn't something El had even been able to consider before, it seemed like a far-off dream, something that wasn't meant for someone like her.

And yet, she couldn't shake off the fantasy of walking around campus, Mike meeting her at the steps of her building, taking her heavy books off her with a warm smile and gently entwining their hands together as they talked about their day. El found herself sighing, a melancholy feeling lulling her senses for the moment. She wanted everything with Mike, she wanted to tell the world that he was hers, she wanted a future with him always by her side.

It seemed like a harsh irony that the world she was trying to keep him away from was the one thing she needed to tackle to get the future that she wanted. But it wasn't like El could walk away from her past. She loved Kali and had grown to care about the gang and their wellbeing. El knew that even if she left that all behind, she would never be safe, never be able to breathe freely until Brenner and the lab were destroyed.

El was so consumed by her complex thoughts that she almost walked past her destination, her feet quickly pausing in the slushy snow as she halted in front of the video store. Some of her inner worries left

her expression as she smiled warmly and headed into the small store in search of one of her favourite people.

She was thankful for the warmth of the small stuffy space compared to the icy temperatures from the streets and quickly unzipped Mike's winter coat revealing her black hoodie and black jeans underneath.

"Well if it isn't my favourite super hero!" called a teasing voice from over by the counter.

El looked up with a bashful smile to see Max sitting up on the wooden surface next to the cash register filing her nails. "You know I'm not a super hero, right?" she responded with a chuckle as she weaved her way through the narrow aisles of videos towards the counter.

Max shrugged, a smirk on her face as she concentrated on a particularly stubborn nail. "I'd say you're the closest to it. Accept the compliment Ellie."

"Ellie?" El questioned with a bemused smile as she leaned up against the counter in front of the red head.

"Yeah I've nicknamed you." Max laughed, taking her blue eyes off her nails and casting her mirth filled gaze onto El who was giggling.

"You've given me a nickname for my nickname?"

"You could say that." Max grinned as she put the nail file under the counter before straightening back up. "So, I see you stuck with your promise of visiting me at the store!" she said happily, hopping off the counter top. "Wanna go for a walk?"

El didn't really want to go for a walk, knowing she had only just started to warm up from the cold. But she also knew that she couldn't say no to Max. "Sure!" she answered enthusiastically, pulling Mike's beanie hat further down her ears for good measure.

Max grabbed her jacket and was zipping it up when she looked at El and snorted. "I see you're wearing your boyfriend's clothes..."

"Mike's not my boyfriend..." El blushed in response, her heart

pounding at the thought of being Mike Wheeler's girlfriend. Was he going to ask her? She couldn't pretend she hadn't been thinking about it...*a lot*.

"Yeah sure he's not," Max rolled her eyes in amusement as she tied a scarf around her neck and pulled her trapped red hair free of the woollen material. "Right come on princess, let's get going. There's somewhere I've been meaning to take you." She added happily, linking arms with a surprised El.

"Where are we going?" she asked intrigued, looking down at her linked arm with Max and smiling warmly to herself at the contact. It wasn't the same as holding hands with Mike but being close with Max like this felt safe and comforting. It was like they were sisters.

"It's a surprise," the red head grinned in reply, pulling El along with her, only pausing to lock the glass panelled front door of the video store.

The girls giggled and chatted happily as they walked down the street, to an outsider they would look like just two normal best friends. No one would know the secrets and the powers that El harboured.

"So, have you and Mike French kissed yet?" Max asked, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively while El blushed and looked down at the wet snow in front of them as they walked closer to the main shopping district.

"No not yet," El admitted before a pleased grin curved onto her pink lips. "But we have kissed a lot and it's always really exciting and... *hot*." Max squealed and El couldn't help but burst out laughing, the feeling so warm and airy in her chest as the girls giggled foolishly like they were 13 year olds gushing over a guy for the first time. Not that El had ever been able to experience any of that, but she had certainly read about it.

Before she could think any further on her kisses with Mike, Max brought them to a stop in front of a quaint clothes store, the mannequins in the windows looking striking in their clothing choices. El gaped at the outfits in awe, the frills of the dresses and the pleats of the skirts making her sigh with longing. How she wished she could

wear something so pretty.

"Come on let's go in," Max said with a grin on her face. "I've been meaning to bring you here for a while."

"Why?" El asked with a confused frown as her best friend dragged her into the store which smelt floral and clean. Her amber eyes flickered around the multiple racks of feminine clothing, every item looking so beautiful.

Before Max could answer there was a pleased shout of "El!" that made both girls look towards the back of the store where Joyce Byers was walking out of a side door with a steaming mug of what looked like coffee in her hand.

El gaped in amazement, "Joyce? What are you doing here?" she asked dumbfounded whilst moving closer to the older woman.

Joyce chuckled softly, placing her coffee on the sales counter before hurrying over to El with open arms. "I work here sweetie," she answered with a warm smile before engulfing the young woman into a tight squeeze. "It's so good to see you!"

El couldn't comprehend why she always felt so choked when Joyce hugged her. There was just something in the embrace, a missing piece of the puzzle in El's life that so desperately wanted to slot into place. "It's really good to see you too," she managed to say in a thick voice, closing her eyes and resting her chin on Joyce's bony shoulder.

"Okay I've got to get in on this hug," Max teased before stretching her own arms wide to engulf around both El and Joyce who equally laughed in response.

"Let me make you girls a drink," Joyce bustled around a few minutes later as El and Max sat perched on the edge of the counter. El smiled in thanks and then turned her eyes back onto the clothes, yearning to touch the fabrics to see if they were as soft and delicate as they looked.

"You like these kinds of clothes huh?" Max commented, bringing El out of her daze. She turned to the red head and blushed, nodding

slightly in agreement with her statement. Max chuckled and smiled, "good because that's why I brought you here."

"What do you mean?" El frowned, her brow etched with confusion as her gaze flicked between the clothing racks and the smug smile on her best friend's face.

"Let's be honest El, the goth look isn't really you. I remember how you basically *squealed* when we got you that cream sweater and the pleated skirt for your date." Max said with a knowing smile before she shuddered dramatically. "I still can't believe I was getting you ready for a date with *Wheeler* though."

El giggled, the mention of Mike making her feel giddy. "He's the best man I know Max, I wouldn't have wanted to go on a date with anyone else."

The red head grinned and rolled her eyes dramatically, "oh believe me I know." She looked around quickly, as if checking they were truly alone before leaning into El and whispering, "and between you and me, Mike is a really good guy. Yeah, he's clumsy as hell and so nerdy that I could actually die. But he's really loyal and caring, especially over his friends and you might not have seen it yet but he can be pretty brave when he wants to be. Stupid, but brave."

El already knew all of this about Mike but it didn't stop her from beaming with happiness at hearing Max speak about him with such high regard. "He's amazing," she sighed dreamily, her hazel eyes glazing over slightly as she was swept away by her feelings for that beautiful man. His mischievous grin, the sparkle in his starry eyes and the redness of his full lips making her suddenly dazed.

"Earth to El," Max was teasing as she waved a hand in front of El's face making her blink and then chuckle in awkward embarrassment at being so clearly swept up even at the thought of Mike.

"Sorry," El laughed, clearing her throat and hoping that the red blush in her cheeks would calm down. "I'm just –"

"In love." Max concluded with a confident smile.

In response all El could do was open her mouth to speak before Joyce was back with their drinks. She quickly closed her mouth, keeping her deep feelings about Mike to herself, at least for now. El might not have known a lot about love, but she knew that if she was going to declare her feelings, she wanted Mike to be the first to know.

"So, honey, what have you been up to this week?" Joyce asked as she lifted her mug to her lips, blowing on the steam and taking a sip.

El who had been reaching for her own cup, paused abruptly while her skin suddenly felt clammy and warm. She didn't have a problem telling Max about the things she did with the gang, in a way she didn't even mind telling Mike. But for some reason El found herself not wanting to disappoint Joyce. She didn't want her to know the things she had done so that she could survive another day.

"Oh, um...this and that," El said evasively as her fingers clutched around the handle of her mug, bringing it close to her face before taking a sip of the coffee. "I've not really left my...um, my house."

"I'm not surprised," Joyce chuckled, leaning her hip against the counter. "It's freezing out there, I'd stay in bed if I could!" The motherly figure turned her gaze onto the clothing in the store before looking at Max. "Have you told El why you brought her here yet?"

Max grinned and shook her head, "no but I was just about to."

El looked between the two women either side of her, suddenly anxious about what they had planned. Joyce seemed to catch her expression and gently placed her hand on El's arm, "don't worry sweetie it's nothing serious! It's just that Max happened to mention that she wanted to treat you to a few new clothes and I suggested that you came here, because you can use my discount and the store is always quiet anyway."

El's mouth opened slightly in surprise and her eyes widened in disbelief as she turned her face to Max. "You want to buy clothes for me? But won't that be expensive?"

Max laughed and shrugged nonchalantly, "don't worry about that. My step dad and mom are rich and always working away, so I just stole a

wad of cash out of my mom's emergency supply. I doubt she'll even notice."

"But what if she *does* find out?" El persisted suddenly feeling guilty.

Max put down her own drink and focused solely on her best friend. "Look El those two idiots owe me a ton of money for keeping that video store going, so consider it compensation."

El took in the mischievous grin on Max's face and the supportive smile on Joyce's lips and suddenly felt bubbling excitement rise in her body. She bit her lip, desperate not to grin too much as her eyes once more took in all of the clothes options. "I can try all of these clothes on?" she asked hopefully, her gaze focused on a pink sweater.

Joyce laughed softly and nodded her head, "of course sweetie. Whatever you want. Consider me and Max your assistants."

"Let's get started then," El said breathlessly, her eagerness to try on these beautiful clothes too much to bare. She rushed over to the racks of clothes, her eyes wide with awe as she carefully touched the colourful and delicate fabrics. Her heart was thundering with excitement at the idea of picking out clothes that she wanted. Clothes that would be her own personal style, her own identity separate from the gang.

Mike yawned loudly as he walked towards the usual table that he, Lucas, Dustin and Will ate their lunch at in the college cafeteria. He had endured a morning full of lectures and just had one more class that afternoon before he would be free.

He clutched onto his tray of food, determined for once not to trip and lose half of his lunch. That had sadly happened at least three times in the past two weeks. Mike heaved a sigh of relief when he finally placed his tray next to Dustin's, greeting his friends and sitting down.

"Is Max not joining us today?" Will asked curiously looking around at the busy cafeteria as he removed the saran wrap covering his sandwich.

Lucas chewed his bacon for a moment and swallowed before speaking, a secretive grin on his face. "Yeah she called me this morning and said she'd be joining us, but they must be running late." He said vaguely, glancing at Mike and smirking.

"Who is 'they'?" Dustin asked, his voice muffled as he tried to speak through a mouthful of pizza.

Mike looked up curiously at Lucas who was grinning down at his plate of food. "I'm not at liberty to discuss that," he teased the boys who all looked at each other in confusion.

"Well can we at least *guess*?" Dustin pleaded, his face filling with excitement at the idea of a game.

Lucas snorted but shrugged his shoulders casually, "I guess you can." He grabbed his can of coke and looked around at the boys. "Who wants to guess first?"

Will looked up, his green eyes lingering across the cafeteria as a smile filled his features. "I'll guess first." He said eagerly turning his attention back to Lucas.

"Okay, shoot."

"El." Will said with confidence, making Mike almost choke on his scrambled egg just at the mention of the girl who had stolen his heart. He hadn't told the guys that every night she pulled him into the void and they fell asleep together; he didn't think he could cope with the taunting they would give him. Mike knew they would assume him and El had done other things too.

Lucas spluttered on his soda, it almost coming out of his nose as he quickly wiped his mouth and put the can back on the table. "How the hell did you know?!"

"El's coming *here*?!" Mike interrupted, his eyes wide and his heart immediately pounding with excitement and nerves. He looked down at his blue sweater and black jeans hoping he looked presentable. His hands moved quickly to his hair trying to make the mop of dark locks smoother.

"She sure is," Will said with a smug grin trying his hardest not to laugh at the manic behaviour of Mike as Dustin burst out laughing at the Paladin's reaction.

"I repeat, how did you know?" Lucas said pointing at Will who just grinned and shrugged.

"I *know* because she is literally walking over with Max right now."

Mike practically gave himself whiplash as he turned around in his chair to catch sight of El. He gasped when sure enough he spotted her walking nervously towards the table, being led by the arm by Max who was holding a number of bags and had a big smirk on her face.

El was bundled up in Mike's winter coat which fell down to her knees, her curly hair mostly hidden under his beanie hat. A surge of pride seemed to spring from his heart over the fact that she was still wearing his clothes. *His* clothes.

Mike gulped nervously, butterflies attacking his stomach as he couldn't take his eyes off the mesmerising beauty. Her eyes locked onto his and he gasped quietly, feeling the whole cafeteria full of students disappear. He could only see her, and he never wanted to look away. She smiled at him softly and he felt a large dorky grin take over his lips.

"Hey guys," Max called over to them as the girls got closer.

"Hey Max, hey El!" Will said happily, getting up to help Dustin with two chairs that he had grabbed from a free table.

"Hello my ladies," Dustin teased bowing to the girls as he pushed a chair right next to Mike's, so close in fact that the hard plastic knocked the Paladin's knee. Not that he minded of course, he was too busy staring at El.

Max dropped the bags next to the table and then boycotted her own chair in favour of Lucas's lap, he grinned at her wrapping his arms around her waist. "Hey babe," he beamed leaning forward and pressing his lips to Max's.

"Hi handsome," she cooed in response, stroking his cheek before

leaning forward to steal a piece of bacon off his plate.

"You two are fucking gross," Dustin shuddered going back to his pizza.

"Bite me," Lucas muttered darkly but kept his eyes on his girlfriend who was now feeding him bacon.

"No thanks," Dustin said chirpily. "I'll leave that job to Max."

In the meantime El was hovering at the end of the table, her eyes on Mike's and his eyes on her. He felt stupid for still feeling so nervous around her, but he felt like her beauty and her presence was something that he would never get used to. Mike couldn't shake the amazement that El had feelings for him too, that she actually wanted to kiss him and hold his hand. It felt like a perfect dream that he was just waiting to wake up from.

"Hi El," Mike said, his voice come out shaky and choked. He couldn't stop smiling though, just looking at her was making him giddy.

She grinned in response, her hazel eyes bright and warm. "Hi Mike," she replied breathlessly. El's gaze left his own for a moment to look at the empty seat next to him.

Mike pulled the chair out for her with a bashful smile, already excited at the idea of having her sit so close. El beamed back at him in response and removed her beanie hat, Mike suddenly captivated by how the loose curls fell down her shoulders.

She placed the beanie hat next to his tray and then went for the zipper of the winter coat. Everyone else was focusing on their own food and their own conversations, none of them having any idea of how El doing something so normal, so *innocent* was causing a riot of heat to build up inside of Mike.

His jaw dropped open as his gaze followed the zip down the coat before El's fingers pushed at the material and pulled it off her body. Mike gulped, his eyes and his body not ready for what she was wearing. El was in a pink fitted sweater which clung to her curves in the most delicious way, the material of the sweater tucked into a

denim skirt and her lean legs covered in black woolly tights. *Oh fuck, she's hot.*

Mike could barely breathe, his cheeks instantly going red and his pupils dilating as he stared at the most beautiful woman in the world. His brain practically malfunctioning. He barely even heard Max teasing, "oh Mike do you like El's new outfit? We went shopping today."

A weird choking noise escaped his throat and the blush on his cheeks only seemed to spread to his neck with embarrassment. Dustin and Lucas were sniggering at his reaction, Will was trying not to laugh by stuffing his sandwich in his mouth and Max was giving Mike a knowing smirk. El on the other hand gave him a sweet smile, her eyes practically adoring him as her gaze danced over the blush on his face.

"Y-You look..." His eyes flickered involuntarily down El's body, taking in her curves and her svelte figure. *Okay Michael now is not the time to be a creep.* He wrenched his gaze back up to her face, not finding it any easier looking at her stunning features, especially those expressive eyes. "You look beautiful." He finally got out, catching her gaze and feeling a bashful but proud smile appearing on his face when he noticed the pleased expression in her eyes.

"Thank you, Mike," El beamed, her smile so innocent and cute compared to how her outfit was affecting his brain at the moment. She sat gracefully into the chair next to Mike and he grinned at her, both of them staring at one another.

"Okay I take it back," Dustin said chewing on his pizza crust and observing the new couple. "Mike and El are *definitely* more gross than Max and Lucas."

The others all laughed but Mike was too caught up with El to even pay attention to his friends right now. He looked down at her hands resting on her lap and he carefully took her right hand with his left, entwining their fingers and marvelling at how perfectly they fitted together.

"I missed you," Mike whispered, his gaze slowly looking up from their

hands and stopping at El's eyes. She smiled back at him softly and exhaled deeply, calmly.

"I missed you too." She replied back in a quiet and gentle voice, her thumb drawing a circle on the back of Mike's hand and making him swallow slowly. His chest felt warm and full with El next to him, like everything was perfect.

Mike smiled content and at peace, beaming at El and slowly allowing the outside world to filter back in, but only just. He remembered where he was and looked back into the hazel eyes he adored. "Would you like some lunch?" he asked offering her his tray. "Or I can buy you something else?"

El smiled and shook her head, "thank you, but I ate lunch with Max and Joyce." She explained, her eyes going to the red head for a moment before quickly looking away considering Max and Lucas were currently locked in a fiery embrace. The boys were all used to this happening at the lunch table but it was a first for El.

"Ignore them," Mike chuckled, waving his free hand nonchalantly and pretending that he didn't kind of wish him and El were also locked in a fiery embrace too. "So," he exhaled trying to clear his thoughts. "You were with Max and Joyce today then?" he prompted, eager to know what El had been up to.

"Yes," She said excitedly, nodding her head for good measure. "Max took me to the clothes store Joyce works at and they bought me new clothes." Her voice and features still gave off an amazement, like she couldn't believe how lucky she was.

Mike couldn't help but beam, loving how happy she looked. She should always be this happy, she deserved it. "Did they let you pick the clothes or were they dressing you up?" he asked chuckling slightly at the idea of Joyce getting the chance to dress up a daughter.

El laughed gently too and the sound made Mike want to sigh happily, it was so beautiful. "No, they let me choose." She said with a grin, looking down at her denim skirt. "I like skirts and dresses." Her words were like a statement, like she knew she shouldn't be allowed to like

those things, but she was trying to be her own person. It made Mike's heart fill with pride that she was finding her identity.

He gently squeezed their joined hands making El looking back up at his face before he spoke tenderly, "well you look beautiful. You've clearly got a good sense for fashion."

El dipped her head shyly, a coy smile on her face as she looked down at their entwined fingers and exhaled slowly. "Thank you," she whispered.

Mike grinned and nodded his head, "anytime." He wanted to say more, wanted to kiss her and pull her even closer, but Dustin soon interrupted, complaining that Mike was hogging El. He rolled his eyes in annoyance but started to eat his lunch, not caring that his scrambled eggs were now cold. Dustin talked to El and Will about X-Men making them both laugh at his crazy suggestions over them forming an alliance and fighting evil.

An hour later the party started to gather their things for their next class. Will waved goodbye first, leaving for the art building while Lucas and Max were whispering with each other, conspiring smiles on their faces as they snuck off together.

"You ready for class?" Dustin asked Mike as he hoisted his back pack on and stacked up the trays. Mike's eyes went to El who was stood adjusting his beanie hat on her head and he felt his heart jump into his throat at his dilemma.

"Um...I think I'll skip," Mike muttered to Dustin not wanting El to hear and chastise him for missing a class.

Dustin looked between the couple and smirked, leaning in slightly to Mike so he could whisper. "I'll go chill with Will after class, dorm room is *all* yours." He winked suggestively and hurried off before Mike could even open his mouth to protest that him and El were not going to have sex. He sighed wishing his friends would stop teasing him.

"Don't you have class too?" El asked curiously making Mike jump as he left his embarrassed thoughts behind and turned to the girl of his

dreams. *Literally*.

"No," Mike said probably a little too quickly, blood rushing to his pale cheeks as he cleared his throat. "I just mean, well, um I want to spend the afternoon with you." His words were croaked out nervously and Mike huffed, wanting to grab one of the trays and smack himself in the face for being so annoyingly awkward.

El on the other hand was glowing from his statement, her eyes sparkling and her smile wide and happy. Her hand rested on his arm for a moment and their gaze connected. "I would *love* that."

Well I love you. Mike's thoughts practically screamed but he managed to just about bite back the statement, not wanting to scare El with the intensity of his feelings. He knew it was probably too soon for her to know.

"That's great," Mike replied breathlessly instead, a warm smile on his face. "What do you wanna do?"

El contemplated this for a moment, he watched curiously as her eyes glazed over in thought and her lips pursed ever so slightly. Mike loved picking up on all of the quirks of El, what made up her personality.

She exhaled heavily, something in her expression changing to reluctance. "Maybe we could work on that...*problem* I told you about." El whispered cryptically her eyes looking around nervously at the other students in the cafeteria. None of them paid Mike and El any attention but he knew her concerns of them overhearing anything about the lab. It was hard to know if they were ever truly safe.

Mike could tell by the disappointment and reluctance in El's features that she had wanted a better afternoon than the prospect of trying to face her demons, but Mike had promised himself that he would help El no matter what.

He reached for her hand, entwining their fingers and giving her supportive smile, "of course we can." His eyes were filled with determination as he thought about what the best way to go about this

was. "Should we go to my dorm room?"

El nodded almost immediately and Mike smiled in relief, giving her hand a squeeze and leading her out of the cafeteria. As they made their way through the crowd of students, a few fellow class men that Mike vaguely knew looked up with interest, noticing him with the most beautiful girl in the world and probably wondering how the hell he had got so lucky.

Mike couldn't help but grin with pride, wondering if people thought him and El were a couple. His stomach swooped with butterflies and his heart sped up at the idea of her being his girlfriend. It had been something he had been thinking of a lot recently and he wondered if he was going to have the opportunity and the perfect moment to ask her the question that was lingering on the tip of his tongue.

"So, um how is this going to work?" Mike asked nervously as he sat opposite El on his bed. Both of them were crossed legged, their knees touching at their proximity as they both held hands and looked at one another.

El took a deep breath, her hands shaking as the reality of what she was about to do hit her like a punch to the gut. "I'm going to try and bring you into the void with me and then..." she closed her eyes and held her breath for a moment as Mike gently stroked her hands with his thumbs. She opened her eyes and was met with warm and calm amber ones. "And then I will try and search for him."

Mike nodded, his jaw clenched clearly from the building tension in the room. El knew that he was scared, could see the nerves and worry etched into his eyes. But he still chose to be here with her, to help if he could and that meant everything to her.

"There's just something I need to do before we go into the void," El whispered seriously, her eyes still set on Mike's.

"What is it?" he exhaled quietly, his gaze searching hers. El gently took her right hand out of Mike's hold and moved it up so that her fingers weaved into his thick hair and pulled his face down to hers.

A gasp of surprise left Mike's slightly parted mouth as El closed her eyes and pressed her lips to his, a sigh of contentment leaving her fluttering chest as she finally felt at home. He smiled softly against her mouth and his own free hand cupped her cheek as they kissed, their mouths moving together in slow and purposeful movements, every touch and moment of pressure sending sparks of electricity throughout their bodies.

El finally pulled away, a dreamy smile on her face, her heart a lot more at ease than it had been a few minutes ago. "There," she said in a breathy low voice. "That's better."

Mike blinked, his eyes slightly blearily for a moment before a glorious grin exploded onto his lips and he clutched her hands again. "You can do this." He told her, the fire in his eyes fuelling the determination inside of El.

She nodded and closed her eyes, trying to let the anxiety leave her body as she concentrated on the void, on the nothingness and the darkness, allowing it to pull her and Mike into its emptiness.

El opened her eyes when she heard a gasp next to her. She looked around to find herself stood in the void, her hand holding onto Mike's as he stared at the space. She couldn't help but smile softly to herself at how he was *still* awed by the void despite being in the space with her every night for almost a week.

Mike squeezed El's hand and turned to look at her, his eyes wide but set with purpose. "What can I do?" he asked, his voice echoing in the empty void.

She looked at him in surprise and then grinned, allowing his pure soul to fill her with warmth. He was everything to her; the light in the darkness, a beacon of hope in her dreary existence. "Stay next to me." El whispered in response.

Mike smiled softly, too choked for words but nodding his head gently in recognition as he clutched her hand ever so tightly.

El looked ahead of her and Mike to the endless darkness, the prospect of finding Brenner, hearing his voice and seeing those eyes was more

terrifying then she could comprehend.

But with her light by her side, the darkness wasn't able to trick her with ghosts of her past like it could before. She knew Brenner wouldn't know she was looking for him in the void, thinking that she was too weak and scared to even try. For once El felt like she had the advantage.

"Okay," El exhaled speaking more to herself than Mike as she closed her eyes once more and allowed her mind to go back to the horror of her past. Skipping over the experiments, the hissing of cats, the feel of cold water seeping into her skin, she focused solely on him, *papa*.

El heard Mike jump slightly next to her, his hand instinctively pulling her back with him. She opened her eyes quickly to look at what he was seeing. It wasn't Brenner. But it was a murky cloud of grey, a silhouette of a figure only barely visibly through the fog. El frowned unsure what it was.

"Your mind is trying to block him out," Mike answered in a whisper, his own voice strained as he tried desperately to squint through the fog at the distant figure. "Wait," he added in a hushed voice. "Do you hear that?"

El's heart was pounding loudly in her chest but she knew that wasn't the sound Mike was referring to. Through the fog there was a muffled voice, the sound was quiet, and it was impossible to hear what they were saying, but even the smallest hint of *his* voice made El suddenly quiver.

"Hey, are you okay?" Mike asked turning to her, feeling her shaking as concern etched into his handsome face.

El looked at Mike through watery eyes, her skin felt tight and cold as the fear of seeing Brenner started to return to her body. "We need to go." She choked out in a heavy voice, her breathing becoming irregular as panic at hearing him made her nightmares come to the forefront of her mind.

Mike immediately nodded and moved forward, clutching El to his chest, one hand at the back of her head and the other on her upper

back as he pressed a calming kiss to her temple. "Let's go home." He whispered soothingly.

They awoke with a gasp, both of them in the same position as they had been before entering the void, their legs crossed, and their hands entwined as they faced each other. The moment they returned El burst into tears, and Mike pulled her forward, helping her to clamber into the space that his crossed legs had made for her as he nestled her to his body.

She sobbed into his chest, her fists clutching at his sweater as Mike's arms wrapped securely around her as he gently rocked her back and forward and hushed her in a soothing voice. "You did so good," he whispered into her ear before kissing it tenderly.

"I-I h-heard his voice M-Mike," El cried, sniffing against his chest and shaking her head, trying desperately to get the sound of Brenner's muffled tone out of her brain. "H-How am I m-meant to destroy h-him if I can't even hear his voice?!"

Mike pulled her even closer and bent his head down to pepper kisses across El's wet cheeks. "El give yourself some credit. This was the first time you really looked for him, and you did amazingly well. When you're ready we'll look for him again, and I will be by your side. I am *never* going to leave you." He promised her, his words strong and loving making El cry even more.

"I don't d-deserve you," she sobbed gasping to control her panting. "You deserve someone who doesn't h-hide you from their real life, someone who isn't *messed up*."

Mike shook his head, "you're wrong El. I know this isn't the ideal situation, but situations change okay? It won't always be like this, I *promise*."

El sniffled, pulling back enough to look up at Mike, need to see the truth in his beautiful eyes which were filled with love and life. "You promise?" she croaked, her voice wavering, her lips slightly parted as she awaited his answer.

Mike reached out and placed his palm against El's cheek making her

instantly melt into his touch. "I promise." He told her with a strong and steady voice, his words like liquid gold to her heart.

El exhaled in relief and leaned in just as Mike's lips met her own. She closed her eyes, giving into his touch and his warmth. Allowing his light to shut out the darkness that was trying desperately to creep into her soul. He wouldn't allow it, he was like a knight, fighting off evil and freeing her from the clutches of the dark.

Mike leaned back against his bed, bringing El down with him. She tucked into his side and his arms pulled her into the safest embrace she had ever known. Her tears faded, and she rested her head on his chest, allowing his steady heartbeat to lull her to sleep as the feel of Mike stroking her hair and pressing feather light kisses to her forehead shut out the darkness.

AN: What am I going to do with these two?! They are so in love!

10. Sisters and Mermaids

Part of Your World

AN: Hi all! I hope you enjoy this chapter because we won't be getting this much fluff for a while now!

Listen to Ella Henderson's *Yours* for the last section of this chapter, it really inspired me and is such a beautiful song

Chapter 10: Sisters and Mermaids

Friday 7th February 1992

Mike sat on his bed, a deep frown creasing his brow as he stared down at his college work trying to make sense of the algorithms he was working on for his group project. Mike and Dustin had opted for a computer-game construction module, but the formula and physics simulation was challenging even Mike's brain capacity.

What was *not* helping matters was that he couldn't stop thinking about El. Every time he read a line of code he wondered what she was doing. Was she okay? Was she trying to find Brenner in the void on her own? Did Kali have her out on a mission? Was she safe?

These same questions twisted through Mike's mind every single day, only being eased back when El would pull him into the void every night so they could attempt to break through her mental block before falling asleep together.

While he could talk to her every night, he missed her physical presence. Nothing could compare to really holding her, filling his lungs with her sweet scent, closing his eyes and pressing his lips to hers. It was a feeling he never wanted to go without, El was a lifelong addiction, one that made everything better, one that Mike would never be able to get enough of.

The dorm room phone which was situated on the side table next to Mike's bed because Dustin was too lazy to answer it started to ring.

It's shrill and loud noise made Mike jump so that his pencil rolled off the bed and onto the floor, his textbook following it in quick succession.

He groaned in annoyance but made no move to collect the items as he reached for the phone instead. "Hello?" Mike asked trying to stifle a yawn as he sat back against his pillows making the cord of the phone stretch.

"Well if it isn't my long, lost brother," came a teasing female voice that made Mike roll his eyes in exasperation, but he couldn't help the small smile from spreading on his lips.

"Hey Nance."

"Hey stranger!" She replied with a soft chuckle. "I've been trying to contact you on and off for like two weeks now. Where the hell have you been?"

Mike immediately felt his cheeks blushing and he was thankful that Nancy wasn't here to witness it. His thoughts immediately went to El and how over the past few weeks his whole being had been all consumed by her. Yeah sure he went to his classes, but could he honestly say he had been concentrating on anything else that wasn't her?

"Sorry," Mike said instead, clearing his dry throat. "I've just been busy, you know what college is like..." He hoped she would understand and not press him any further on the matter.

"I sure do," Nancy sighed. "But it would be nice to hear off my brother now and again. And you need to ring mom, she called *me* to find out how you were getting on seeing as you've been so mysteriously out of contact!"

"Sorry," Mike repeated as he rubbed at his tired brow. "College has been kicking my ass. How are you? How is Jonathan?"

He listened patiently as his sister told him about life in New York City with her fiancé who just happened to be Will's older brother. Small world huh?!

Nancy worked for a large journalism corporation while Jonathan was a freelance photographer as well as having a part time job in a recording studio. They made ends meet and seemed settled in the large city. Mike knew their mom would much prefer all of her children to still be in Hawkins where she could keep an eye on them, but Mike couldn't imagine going back, especially when he knew El had been held prisoner there for 18 years.

Mike and Nancy were discussing their little sister Holly and how she was getting on at school when Dustin unlocked the dormitory room door and walked in, waving casually to Mike who raised his arm up in greeting whilst still talking to his sister.

"Is that Nancy?" Dustin whispered from the other side of the room where he was chucking his back pack onto his bed. Mike nodded but didn't say anything, trying to concentrate on what Nancy was saying about their parents still arguing.

"I mean I'm obviously grateful we're all alive and everything, but those two should *never* had got married." Mike said solemnly, his leg bouncing slightly from anxiety. "They obviously aren't made for each other."

"Have you told Nancy about *your wife*?" Dustin teased loudly, sniggering when Mike inhaled a sharp breath and glared at his supposed *friend*.

"What did Dustin say?" Nancy asked in amused confusion, cutting herself off in the middle of her own speech about their parents and their marriage.

Mike felt a heat rise up the back of his neck and he shook his head even though his sister couldn't see. "Um, nothing. He's just being Dustin," he tried to explain shuffling closer to the wall as his friend hurried over, making grabbing hands for the phone.

"Go away!" Mike hissed at Dustin, trying to fight him off for the phone.

"Okay now I *have* to talk to him!" He could hear Nancy laughing while the two boys wrestled for the phone. Dustin definitely had the

advantage from having more muscles and weight than Mike. In a matter of seconds he was flat on his front, his body digging into the blanket while Dustin sat on his back preventing him from moving away.

Mike squirmed trying to wriggle free but it was no use. He let out a heavy dramatic sigh and closed his eyes, wishing he couldn't hear what Dustin was telling his sister.

"Nance your little brother has a *girlfriend*!" He said gleefully while Mike groaned and mumbled, "she's not my girlfriend mouth breather."

Mike could practically hear Nancy's gasp of excitement and then her voice became incoherent to him as she rambled off questions to Dustin who was more than happy to answer. "Yeah she's really pretty, hot in fact, way out of his league..." Mike huffed, his eyes narrowing as he decided that Dustin would pay for that comment.

"No, she doesn't go to college, she...well you could say she self-studies." Dustin smirked, looking down at a defeated Mike. "How did they meet? Now that is an interesting question. Michael would you like to tell Nancy?"

"Give me the phone Dustin," Mike warned through clenched teeth. His friend chuckled, jumping off his back and handing out the receiver for him. Mike sighed in relief as he felt the ache in his back dissipate and he carefully rolled himself over and shuffled back up to the headboard. "You are dead." Mike snapped at Dustin before grabbing the held out phone from his friend who was laughing with amusement.

Mike exhaled deeply, trying to mentally prepare himself for this conversation. "Nancy?" he cringed, putting the phone to his ear.

"You have a *girlfriend*?! Why the hell didn't you tell me?! This explains everything. You've not been busy with college you ass hole liar, you've been busy with *her*!" Nancy shouted in exasperation and excitement while Mike closed his eyes shut tightly and begged for the interrogation to be over.

"What's her name?" Nancy continued with added vigour. "How old is she? How did you meet her? Does mom know about her? Shit of course mom doesn't know otherwise she would have told me."

"Nanc – "

"When can I meet her? How long have you two been dating?"

"Nancy just lis – "

"What is she like? Have all the party met her? Have you two *slept* together Mike? Remember to use pro – "

"NANCY!" Mike shouted, his face blazing red at the mention of sex. He was *not* having that conversation with his sister of all people! "Just please STOP."

"Fine," Nancy chuckled, the sound of material shuffling rustled the phone for a moment as she readjusted her sitting position. "But you lied to me, so now you've got to spill."

Mike shook his head adamantly, "I didn't technically lie – "

"Michael Edward Wheeler!" Nancy exclaimed in a voice very similar to their mother's. "Spill. *Now*."

"Uh fine," Mike huffed as he turned away slightly from Dustin who was watching over and lounging on his own bed with a shit eating grin.

"Her name is El and she's 21." Mike began, his breathing becoming a little calmer as he pictured El's smiling and beautiful face in his mind. A bashful grin started to quirk up Mike's lips.

"When's her birthday?" Nancy asked curiously, and he winced realising he didn't know.

"Um, I don't know yet. It's really early days, we met on January 16th."

"Aw you remember the *date* that you met her? That's so cute!" Nancy cooed while the red blush on Mike's cheeks spread to the rest of his

face. He ignored her comment and carried on. It was better to try and get it all out quickly, like ripping off a band aid.

"When we met, I...well um I got into a bit of trouble and she saved me," Mike admitted not wanting to go into the specifics both for El's sake but also for his own sake, he knew his sister wouldn't take kindly to the fact that he was almost mugged. And he *definitely* didn't want their mom to find out.

"We're not dating...yet," Mike mumbled as quietly as he could, wishing that Dustin wasn't happily overhearing this conversation.

"But you *want* to date her?" Nancy said, her grin so obvious even through the phone line. "Why don't you just ask her to be your girlfriend?"

Mike sighed and rolled his eyes, "it's a little more complicated than that. She..." He didn't want to tell Nancy about El's powers, he knew she would understand because she of course knew Will's secret. But if he told her about the life El led, he wasn't so sure his sister would be entirely happy about him being involved in it.

"She has a very overprotective family," Mike continued, knowing his words weren't exactly a lie. "I've never even been able to go to her house because she's worried about what her family will think." He explained, that dull sense of sadness filling his chest.

Nancy snorted in amusement, "and what is so scary about a nerd?!"

Mike exhaled heavily and closed his eyes. He had never met El's sister or the gang properly, but it had only taken a glance at them and stories from El to know that they wouldn't like him. More likely, they wouldn't like what he represented. A new life for El, a new world where she didn't have to be the person they were trying to shape her into. Mike gave her choices and he knew the gang would hate that about him.

"I don't know," Mike mumbled with a sigh. "They're just protective." He said non-invasively, hoping that Nancy would get the hint that he didn't want to discuss it any further.

"Okay," she said calmly, thankfully accepting his answer before asking him something *much* worse. "So, have you slept together yet?"

Mike spluttered and then coughed with embarrassment as the colour that had been leaving his face flooded immediately back with a passion. "T-That's none of your business!" he choked.

Nancy laughed, "I'm going to take that as a no then!" Mike huffed in frustration and waited for his sister to stop her damn giggling. "Just treat her good Mike." She added more softly.

Mike nodded and felt some of the tension leave his shoulders as he pressed his cheek into his pillow and closed his eyes. "I will. I...I *really* care about her Nance," he whispered, the vulnerability in his voice making not even Dustin tease him. In fact, his friend pretended to busy himself with his own college work and put on his head phones.

"Tell me about her then," Nancy said gently, her voice light as if she was smiling warmly.

And so he did. Mike spent the next 45 minutes talking in great detail about El, what she looked like, her laugh, her smile, how her eyes lit up. He told her about their movie marathon and their gentle bickering over *Disney* and *'Star Wars'* (Nancy interrupted to insist Disney was better). He explained that she had stayed over at Joyce and Will's house and how they had built a snow man together. With a blush in his cheeks and a fluttering in his heart Mike told Nancy how they then shared their first kiss before he walked her back to campus.

It was like the flood gates had opened and Mike found himself telling his sister how he couldn't stop thinking about El, worrying about her, wondering what she was up to. That anytime they spent together made him feel complete and how amazing it was when the whole party including El hung out together. It was like she had always been a member, like there had always been a spot reserved just for her.

"Wow," Nancy explained after Mike took a deep breath following his shared feelings. "It sounds like you're in love her Mike." His sister said calmly, without teasing or hidden agenda. She sounded in awe of the feelings he had exclaimed.

Mike took a shaky breath, his hand quivering slightly as he clutched the phone tighter. His insides were filled with technicolour butterflies and his heart was pounding. He didn't scoff at her statement, didn't blush. He merely smiled shyly and whispered, "I know."

El was back from the laundrette, heaving a full bag of freshly washed and dried clothes into her bedroom, sighing when her arms were finally free of the weight. She reached for her black hoodie, tugging it off her body before pulling the blonde wig from her brunette locks.

She immediately felt more like herself, especially when taking off the hoodie revealed a soft pink shirt underneath, one of the many clothing items she had been gifted from Max and Joyce. El couldn't help but smile as she thought about the two women, any chance that she got she would visit Max, both girls then walking to Joyce's store to have a hot drink with her. It was a routine that El was enjoying, a piece of the puzzle in what she wanted her life to look like.

She dragged the bag of laundry towards her bed and then sat down, peacefully plucking out each item of clothing and folding it neatly on top of her mattress ready to be put away into the dresser.

El continued with this task for a while until there was a knock at her door which stood ajar. She looked up to find Kali stood in the slither of space, her dark eyes flicking between the clothes and El. "Can we talk?" she asked in her mellow tone that gave nothing away about how she was feeling.

"Of course," El said with a small smile, absentmindedly tugging the blanket over the folded clothes, not wanting Kali to get a good look at them.

Her sister came over and joined her on the mattress, propping her small body up beside the wall that the bed was against and looking at El with a slight frown. "You would tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you?" She asked quietly, her dark eyes boring into El's slightly nervous hazel orbs.

"Yes of course," El answered in a heartbeat, her chest squeezing uncomfortably at Kali's question. "Why...why do you ask?" She tried

to make her tone casual, but the adrenaline whooshing through her veins was difficult to stop, as colour started to fill her cheeks and clammy sweat lifted inside of her palms.

Kali sighed heavily, "these last few weeks, you just seem...different."

El looked down at her lap where her hands were clenched nervously together as shame started to creep into her heart. "Is this because I was out all night? I am sorry about that." She mumbled, still looking down at her clammy hands.

Kali waved her off with a casual hand gesture and shook her head. "No, it's not that, although I won't be forgetting *that* anytime soon." She warned with a huff, as they both remembered the panic she had experienced. "It's more like you're becoming a different *person*."

El looked up at her sister, suddenly curious about whether the life she had been living the last few weeks had seeped into her personality. She wondered if Mike's attention, care and support; Joyce's love and motherly ways and Max's friendship had changed her. In a way El didn't even need to wonder, because she could sense the changes in her soul all by herself.

"What do you mean?" she couldn't help but ask Kali, too inquisitive about how she was resembling these changes.

"Well first of all your clothes," Kali said pointing towards where El had done a terrible job of hiding the garments. "I'm not going to even *ask* where you shoplifted from, but I have never seen you in anything frilly or colourful before." She added with a shudder as she picked up a dress that El adored.

"Well *I* like them," she blurted out, feeling oddly protective over the clothes as she snatched the dress back from Kali's hold. Her sister looked at her in surprise over her outburst.

"It doesn't look good for our image Eleven," Kali said darkly, her eyes lingering on the clothes for a moment before looking back at her sister. "It will make you stand out too much."

El frowned holding Kali's gaze, "but when we are out you always

shield us anyway. People wouldn't even *see* what I wear."

Kali chuckled humourlessly and shook her head, "but that's the thing Eleven. You have been going out on your *own*, more times than I can count. Do you care to elaborate where you have been going?"

El knew this could have been the moment to confess everything to her sister. To tell Kali about Mike, her deep feelings for him and her new friends. But she knew her sister more than she thought she did. El could already tell that Kali was in a no-nonsense mood, she didn't have any sympathy today and would immediately tear down her sister's hope of being able to live both lives, perhaps even merge them into something more bearable.

"I've been working on finding Brenner," is what came out of El's mouth as she looked back up at Kali. She wasn't *technically* lying. Kali looked surprised by her statement, knowing how reluctant and fearful El was of finding the man who had stolen their lives.

"I've been looking for him in the void, I'm working on clearing the mental block and it's getting easier. Especially when I'm outside of this warehouse." El continued to explain, taking a deep breath to ease her anxiety.

"What's changed that you can now look for him? After years of feeling too terrified to even go *into* the void to see him?" Kali asked more curious then criticising.

A small smile perked up El's lips and her heart fluttered the moment she thought about Mike. How he always held her hand and stayed glued to her side when she tried to clear the fog in her mind, and how afterwards he would always cuddle her until the darkness was swept away.

El looked back at her sister and shrugged, allowing her deep feelings for Mike to harbour in her body and hoping they didn't glow out of her soul too much when she simply answered, "I've found strength."

The fog was thick but nowhere near as impenetrable as it had been over a week ago. This time round El and Mike walked further into it,

the wisp of smoke dancing around their limbs, weightless but full of all the suppressed emotions that were hiding Brenner from El's gaze.

She clutched onto Mike's hand even tighter, just the sound of his breathing next to her and the touch of his arm resting against her own was more comforting than El could ever explain.

"I'm right here," Mike whispered, his voice echoing around her in the darkness, lighting her soul like an oil lamp, making her feel warm and safe. She turned her gaze onto him for a moment, he was already looking at her, causing their eyes to immediately lock on one another.

El didn't say anything, but she hoped her wide and searching eyes and soft smile explained to Mike just how grateful she was for him. And not just grateful for him being in the void with her, but what he represented, how his strength gave her strength.

She breathed deeply and turned her focus back onto the lurking fog, closing her eyes and telling her mind to clear the blockage, to no longer be afraid and push back the barriers that were hiding Brenner from her.

El opened her eyes after a while and exhaled in exasperation, "nothing is happening. This is pointless." She couldn't help the bitterness and frustration in her voice, feeling so aggravated with herself. "What is the point in having powers if they can't help me at a time like this?" El added as she turned to Mike, her eyes beseeching him, hoping he could give her answers although it seemed impossible.

Mike turned to face her, taking both of her hands now in his own. His face was filled with empathy and care as his dark amber eyes took in her features, noticing the exasperation written all over her face. "I don't think it's about your powers." He admitted in a gentle voice.

"What do you mean?" El asked with a frown, her eyes focusing on his. It was crazy how much his eyes made her feel safe, just one look and he could melt her into a puddle of such intense feelings that she would be happy to drown forever in that gaze.

Mike sighed and swallowed, "I *mean*, I think this is all emotional El. It's not something your powers are going to be able to help with."

El wanted to scream feeling even more frustrated with herself. "How am I meant to clear it if I don't even know how to deal with my emotions?"

"Hey, it's okay," Mike soothed, his thumbs drawing circles on the back of her hands, sending sparks of electricity up El's arms. "Let's just think about this logically," he added in a calming and realistic voice. "Why have you been afraid to search for him?"

El took a deep breath and continued to look into Mike's eyes, drawing strength from his gentle gaze. "Because I'm scared to see him, to hear his voice..."

"Why?" Mike prompted, his eyes widening ever so slightly as he tried to encourage her to break through the first barrier.

"B-Because," El gasped, her hands shaking in Mike's supportive grasp. She closed her eyes for a moment, calming her breathing before staring back into his eyes. "Because he was my *papa*."

A sob left El's chest as the words fell from her lips and she searched Mike's eyes where she could see understanding and support. "I'm not like Kali, I spent my w-whole *life* in that lab. P-Papa was all I knew, my only parent."

Mike sighed softly and nodded his head slowly, "I understand El. You loved him." He said simply, his thumbs still gently stroking the back of her hands, keeping her grounded and secure.

El sniffled and felt tears fall down her cheeks. "I didn't know for a *long* time that my life wasn't normal. I didn't realise he was...he was *evil*. That he was just using me for my powers." She dipped her head solemnly, closing her eyes as more tears dripped from her lower lashes.

"I'm scared I won't be able to destroy him Mike," El whispered feeling ashamed of her words. "I'm scared that when the moment comes I will look into his eyes and...and I won't be able to kill him."

There was silence for the moment, the quiet almost unbearable in the void as El waited for Mike to respond. She wondered if he thought she was a monster, for caring about Brenner and for needing to kill him.

El felt Mike's right hand leave her hold and suddenly he was lifting her chin up gently, making her open her watery eyes and look at his face. A sob broke from her throat as she realised he wasn't angry with her or disgusted. His eyes were soft, so soft.

"You are stronger than you give yourself credit for El," Mike said in a serious and yet gentle voice. His eyes searched hers for a moment before he spoke again. "And I know that when the time comes you will do the right thing. Whatever that might be. Trust your instincts."

El sighed heavily, her shoulders slumping with relief that Mike could still know all of this about her and *still* look at her like that. Like she was the most important thing in his world. It filled her heart with an unprecedented amount of love and for a moment she wondered whether she should admit her feelings to him.

But as El looked around at the fog she knew this would be the wrong time. She felt vulnerable and didn't want Mike to think she was forced to say the words she longed for him to hear. Instead she squeezed his hand and gave him an adoring smile, "how are you so perfect Michael Wheeler?"

Mike blinked in surprise at her words and then laughed, amazement and disbelief filling his handsome features. "I *highly* doubt I am perfect!"

El rolled her eyes in amusement at his reaction and grinned, the smile reaching her eyes and lighting them as she looked at the man she had fallen in love with. She reached out for him, her hand cupping his cheek, her fingertip stroking down his sharp cheekbone making them both shiver in anticipation.

"You're perfect for me." El whispered, not breaking her eye contact with Mike, wanting him to know just how much she meant those words. She felt his large bashful smile fill his cheeks and then he was leaning down towards her and she was pressing up on her tip toes,

eager to reach his lips.

Their mouths crashed together with more passion than ever before as Mike wrapped his arms around El's waist pulling her closer as her fingers weaved into his hair, keeping his face close to hers. Their lips moved together in a routine that was created on pure instinct. In fact, every moment felt instinctual, like their bodies knew exactly what they were doing.

When Mike's lips parted slightly his heavy breath mixed with El's, the sensation causing a soft whimper to escape her throat before her fingers clutched more tightly to his dark locks as her tongue tentatively stroked gently against Mike's lower lip. He groaned in response and the next thing El knew their tongues were moving together and it felt *incredible*.

Goosebumps ran up and down her arms as their mouths moved together, moans escaping their lips as they shared heated breaths and pants. El could have stayed like that *forever*, completely consumed in Mike, in the way he was holding her, the way his tongue brushed against her own, the sound of his deep groans. *Wow*.

But after a few more minutes Mike pulled away, breathing harshly, his lips looking thoroughly kissed and his pupils dilated. He looked incredibly dazed and El just knew she would be the mirror image of him right now.

"That was...woah," Mike choked out while El tried to catch her breath, smiling bashfully as her cheeks flushed with pleasure.

"Should we go to bed?" Mike blurted out breathlessly before his eyes widened and he realised his wording. There was an awkward silence for a moment before El burst into giggles, endorphins from their passionate kissing making her feel alive and free.

"I didn't m-mean – "Mike gasped out, his face bright red as El chuckled and laced her fingers with his in amusement.

"I know you meant sleep Mike, it's okay," she told him while still grinning at how adorable he was. Mike exhaled in relief and an almost shy smile lit up his face as El tugged on his hand and pulled

him along towards his bed in the void.

"I'm sorry we didn't get much done tonight," El sighed looking around at the dissipating fog as they moved further away from her mind block and closer to the silhouetted bed.

Mike scoffed in indignation and shook his head, "are you kidding?! El you had a major breakthrough of your emotions, if that's not progress I don't know what is." He told her with reproach as they finally reached the bed.

"I suppose," El sighed as she let go of his hand to pull back the duvet and lay on the mattress, Mike joining her a second later. They shuffled and moved so that they were both on their sides facing each other, the tip of their noses just touching.

They basked in the silence for a while, just taking the moment to stare at one another with adoration filling their eyes. El had her arm flung over Mike's torso while his hand was carefully moving loose curl strands behind her ear.

"I was thinking," Mike began in almost a whisper, his eyes still on her hair for a moment before he slowly moved his gaze to her curious eyes. "Do you know when your birthday is?"

El was surprised by the question and shook her head slightly, "no I was never told." She explained with a heavy sigh. "I was told my age when I asked, that's how I know how old I am. But I never even knew that you are *meant* to celebrate a birthday." She shrugged her shoulders casually, knowing that it wasn't something that had ever upset her. How could you be upset by something that you knew nothing about?

Mike looked upset though and El hated it. Hated seeing the sorrow in his beautiful eyes, or how his jaw clenched, and his face fell into a frown. "I'm sorry El," he said softly, continuing to stroke her hair.

El gave him a sad smile, "it's okay Mike. I didn't even know I was missing out." She answered honestly.

Mike heaved a sigh, his brow slowly clearing of worry as he looked

into her eyes. It wasn't long before a beautiful smile crept onto his lips and his features lit back up. "Well, let me make it up to you then."

"What do you mean?" El chuckled, her eyes dancing over Mike's excited boyish features. He looked like he was suddenly beaming with enthusiasm and it warmed her heart.

"Do you think you can get out of your house tomorrow? For like most of the day?" Mike asked instead of answering El's question, a big grin now on his face.

She pursed her lips and shrugged the shoulder that wasn't pressed into the mattress. "I suppose so." She answered coolly before smirking slowly. "*Why?*"

"Nuh uh," Mike teased shaking his head for good measure and bopping El's nose with his finger making her grin. "It's a surprise. If you can get to my dorm for say 10am tomorrow, then I'll handle the rest."

El gave a frustrated and amused sigh, wishing that Mike would just tell her what he had suddenly planned. But the look of excitement and childish glee on his face was too cute for El to want to break. "10am tomorrow, your dorm. I'm sure I can manage that." She said with a grin which in turn made Mike beam, his eyes dancing with happiness as they snuggled closer and eventually fell asleep in each other's arms.

Saturday 8th February 1992

"Where are we going?!" El asked, unable to stop giggling from the buzz of excitement that was rushing through her veins as Mike held her hand and led her down street after street towards wherever their destination was.

Mike turned back to look at El with a big childlike grin on his face. "For the fifth time it's a surprise Miss Impatient!" he teased making them both laugh breathlessly as they carried on with their journey.

El looked around eagerly, a smile on her face as she tried to guess what this surprise was. The closer they got to downtown Chicago the more excitement filled her senses as she thought of the endless possibilities.

Eventually they turned a corner and the downtown truly opened up; busy, bustling, loud and bright. It was one of the things that El really loved about the city.

"Okay," Mike exhaled, his voice wavering with nerves slightly as they came to a stop. He looked down at El who was already gazing at him with an expectant and enthusiastic expression. He smiled shyly and then pointed ahead, "your surprise is over there."

El quickly followed his hand and then gasped, nerves and exhilaration at war in her stomach. Her eyes widened as she took in the large ice rink, already filled with people skating, laughing and falling over. Next to the rink was about four different street food vendors and a loud sound system playing music for those skating. There were large poles at the corners of the ice rink and glittering fairy lights strung from them making the location look romantic.

"So," Mike cleared his throat, his voice still anxious. "What do you think?"

El turned back to him and beamed with a rush of happiness as she wrapped her arms around Mike's neck and stretched up to give him a lingering kiss which he immediately responded to, his warm palms resting on her hips which were covered by a red skirt.

"I love it!" El grinned against Mike's lips making him smile widely as a small breath of relief escaped his lips and tickled her mouth. She pulled back slightly, so she could look into his eyes with amazement, "I didn't even know you could skate."

Mike coughed through an awkward laugh, "um, about that...I haven't been ice skating before either. I thought it would be cool to try it together, and it can't be *that* hard."

He was right, it wasn't *that* hard...well for El.

Mike was like a baby giraffe trying to find his feet for the first time. El couldn't stop smiling, her cheeks were aching, but she didn't care. This moment was truly perfect; the smells of sweet food in the air, music blasting through the speakers and her hand clutched tightly in Mike's while she watched him trying desperately to balance himself.

El grinned as she stared at Mike's determined face, how adorable he looked with his brow furrowed in concentration and his teeth nestled into his lower lip as he focused on staying up right. "Do you know how cute you are?" El couldn't help but ask him, a giggle escaping her chest at the look Mike gave her, like she was crazy for ever thinking that.

"Oh *sure*, really cute," he teased back, slightly breathless from the effort of standing up straight. El laughed, a full and happy laugh bubbling out of her that completely distracted Mike, making him grin at her lovingly before he wobbled, his free arm flailing before he fell on the ice, bringing El down with him.

In his attempt to break her fall, she ended up in his lap sideways, his arms instinctually wrapping around her waist. El and Mike gasped for a moment from the impact with the ice before turning to look at each other, all the other skaters moving around them completely fading away.

Their eyes locked, their cheeks flushed from a mixture of cold from the ice and exhilaration of being in love, and then they were kissing. El's gloved hand on Mike's cheek as he pulled her closer to his chest.

Their kiss broke slowly, and their foreheads rested on one another, they both had their eyes closed and El breathed in Mike's scent, a content smile playing on her lips. "You make me so happy," she whispered to him.

El sensed Mike opening his eyes and so she slowly opened hers too, staring straight back at him, her cheeks flushing with blissful colour as she saw the surprise filling his eyes.

"Do you really mean that?" he asked breathlessly, his dark amber eyes searching her gold hazel eyes.

She felt her heart pounding in her chest, the butterflies multiplying into millions, no longer contained in just her stomach but fluttering around her whole body. Every part of her on edge and in love with Michael Wheeler. "I promise." El replied.

Mike exhaled a shaky breath as if he had been holding it in after asking for her assurance. He grinned so widely that El could see the joy lighting up his beautiful eyes and in turn it made her feel like she could move mountains. "You make me so happy too El," he whispered back his grin now turning into a soft smile. "Happier than I've ever been in my whole life."

El's breath was catching in her chest as she continued to stare into his eyes, feeling like this moment might be that perfect moment to tell him she loved him.

"Mike I – "

"Are you kids going to get up?" barked the serious voice of the security guard who had stopped by the railings to watch Mike and El who both jumped away from each other in surprise. "You're going to cause a serious injury in a moment! Either to yourselves or to another skater." He reprimanded shaking his head.

"S-Sorry!" Mike squeaked as he tried to stumble to his feet, although it was El who got up first and helped pull him up into a standing position.

The moment Mike and El were off the ice they burst out laughing, feeling as foolish and silly as a child. They were still chuckling when they handed in the skate boots and immediately clutched hands, smiling adoringly at one another.

"Where are we going now?" El grinned as Mike playfully tugged her along.

He looked over his shoulder at her and his mischievous smirk made El want to swoon. "Back to my dorm room, I've got another surprise for you."

El knew he didn't mean anything *sexual*, but she would be lying if she

said she hadn't been reading more and more about it recently in her magazines. The articles that she usually skimmed over she now read religiously. She knew her cheeks were blushing, and she didn't want to embarrass herself so merely smiled and nodded, eager to see what else Mike had planned.

The moment Mike and El got back to the dorm room they both exhaled in relief of being free of the freezing temperatures of Chicago. The closer they got to spring the easier it was to handle the cold, but there was still a chill in the air that lingered from the harsh winter.

Mike stripped off his jacket, scarf and green beanie hat, a pleased smile on his face as he watched El remove his winter coat and beanie that now belonged to her. He had to admit she looked a million times better in the clothing then he ever had.

"So, did you like ice skating?" Mike asked cheerfully as he kicked his shoes off and placed them next to where El had left hers by the door. He took a moment to look at her in her deep red skirt, white knitted tights and cream sweater and felt his breath catch in his throat at how she could look so adorable, sweet and sexy all at the same time.

"It was so much fun," El beamed running her hands through her curls which had flattened from the beanie hat, Mike's eyes were captivated by the movement. She looked at him and smirked, "seeing you on the ice was even better."

Mike had been so enthralled by El's hair that it took him a moment to realise what she was saying and the teasing grin on her beautiful face. He spluttered and laughed making her laugh too, "excuse me! It was my first time okay?!"

El bit her lip playfully keeping her eyes on Mike's, "it was my first time too..."

They stared at each other for a moment, both of them blushing as they took the meaning behind the words. Mike was the first to break, clearing his throat and moving his gaze away from El and towards the carpeted floor.

He definitely hadn't brought her back to do that, but now there was a building tension in the air emitting from their bodies and it was very difficult to ignore. Mike hoped that one day he would get to make love to El, to show her not just with his heart and soul how she was everything to him, but with his body as well.

It wasn't that he didn't think about it...a lot. He was a 21-year-old guy so of course he thought about sex. It was on his mind more than he cared to admit, but never before had the concept of making love sounded a million times better. The idea of giving your all to the person you loved the most sounded exhilarating and as Mike sheepishly looked back up at El, he knew he only ever wanted to experience that with her.

But that was not why she was currently here, and Mike blinked trying to remember his *actual* plans.

"Are you hungry?" he asked El who was sitting down on his bed and smiled up at him, nodding her head happily. Mike couldn't help but beam back at her, his eyes sparkling with light.

"Okay, I'll just be a minute," Mike responded, a knowing and excited grin battling to contain itself on his face as he hurried to the kitchen with his heart hammering in his chest.

Mike opened the cupboard that was assigned to him and pulled out a medium sized sheer white box that he had collected that morning, carefully placing it on the counter top and taking off the lid to inspect that the contents was still in a good condition. He sighed in relief.

Inside of the box were four cupcakes, two vanilla and two red velvet all with designs intricately added to the frosting by the cake shop owner that Mike had rushed to the second the store had opened that morning. He had barely even made it back to the dorm before El had arrived.

Very carefully Mike transferred the cupcakes onto a plate and then routed in one of the draws where he had placed a number 2 candle and a number 1. He placed them into the frosting of two of the cupcakes, careful not to spoil the design. He lit the candles with the lighter that he took out of the draw, almost catching the sleeve of his

black sweater on fire because of his jittering hands.

"Calm down," Mike scolded himself, frowning at his own stupidity. He closed the draw and grasped onto the plate, praying that he didn't drop it before he could get the cupcakes highlighted by the glow of two candles to El.

Mike used his back to push open the door of the dorm room and briefly caught El nosily looking through his and Dustin's drawers before she turned to see him and what he held in his hands. She gasped in surprise and Mike couldn't help but grin, loving how wide and happy her gaze had turned.

"Are these for me?" El asked in awe as she looked down at the cupcakes. There were all '*The Little Mermaid*' themed. One of them had Ariel iced onto the frosting, another was Prince Eric, Flounder and Sebastian.

"Of course," Mike chuckled feeling oddly proud of himself by the amount of happiness he had brought El. She was grinning widely, her eyes lit up by the candles as she turned her gaze onto his eyes making his heart race.

"Thank you," she whispered softly, her voice choked with emotion.

Mike smiled back tenderly, his eyes loving and gentle. "You're welcome El. I just wanted to celebrate your birthday. I know that you never were able to, but I want you to know that your birthday is a very special day. It's special to *me*."

He took a deep breath and tried not to feel too embarrassed, "so with that in mind. Happy birthday to you..." He started to sing the birthday song and El laughed softly, her eyes and smile happy as she looked between Mike and the candles, waiting patiently for him to finish the song before she made her wish and carefully blew out the two small flames.

Mike removed the candles out of the frosting and then handed the plate with a grin to El who had settled herself back onto his bed. "Want to watch a movie?" he asked her as innocently as he could, already knowing he had a video tape ready and waiting in the VCR.

"Sure," El answered happily, her finger dipping into a bit of vanilla frosting and humming contently at the taste. Mike tried to pretend that didn't turn him on and instead focused on pulling the television set closer and grabbing the remote control before pressing play.

As Mike suspected El gasped in giddy surprise, her eyes wide with adoration. "*The Little Mermaid*?!" she asked even though she clearly already knew the answer.

Mike grinned, shrugging nonchalantly like it was no big deal. "Well I know we didn't get to finish it and it is your birthday. You get what you want on your birthday." He explained feeling pleased with himself as he walked over to his bed and sat down next to El.

She beamed at him, her eyes bright and gentle. "Thank you, Mike, you're the best." She spoke softly, her words laced with care and gratitude.

Mike flushed with colour and grinned back at her, his eyes taking in her beauty for a moment. "You don't have to thank me. I really like doing these things for you," he explained before laughing, "well you're the only one I do these kinds of things for."

"Good," El said nodding her head, a teasing smile on her face. "I want to be the only one." Her tone was light and playful, but Mike couldn't help but take her statement seriously. He took her hand in his, lacing their fingers together and staring into the depths of her eyes.

"You *are* the only one."

El's smile disappeared and she inhaled deeply at Mike's words, her eyes vulnerable as she watched him closely, both of their racing heart beats audible in the moment. Acceptance started to fill her hazel eyes and then her smile was back, a little less teasing and a lot softer. No words needed to be said in the moment, their eyes saying it all.

They both grinned at each other before finally settling down to watch the movie. Five minutes in and El insisted they changed position. In the end they settled on readjusting the television set so that Mike could sit up against his pillows with El lying in between his legs, her head propped under his chin while his arms were around her

stomach. Both of them grinning and giggling as they ate cupcakes and got into the Disney movie.

"I love Flounder," El mentioned after a while making Mike smile. "He's just so cute and a really good friend," she explained further before feeding a bit of cupcake to Mike who chewed and grinned.

He knew it was technically El's birthday and meant to be about her, but Mike would be lying if he said this wasn't the best day of his life. A whole day with El, kissing, having fun, cuddling and now watching her favourite movie. Mike felt giddy and light, like he could do anything as long as she was by his side. She made him feel invincible.

When Sebastian started to sing *Kiss the Girl*, Mike was reminded of how close him and El had got to kissing the first time they watched this scene together. And it was with a song in his heart and a grin on his face as Mike leaned forward and peppered kisses against El's cheek making her giggle in surprise. He could feel her smile underneath his lips and it made him want to sigh with happiness.

Once the movie was over Mike and El found themselves both lying down on his bed facing each other on a shared pillow. Everything felt very gentle and romantic as Mike cupped El's cheek and slowly stroked her smooth skin with his thumb.

"I wouldn't mind being a mermaid," El whispered, her eyes closed as she savoured Mike's touch.

"Huh?" he murmured, too caught up in touching her soft pink skin.

El opened her hazel eyes and smiled at Mike when he caught her gaze. "I wouldn't mind being a mermaid, living in a completely different world." She explained before her voice turned quieter, "but with you of course."

"Just you and me against the world," Mike said in a content sigh. The quietness of the moment was beautiful, just the two of them in the darkening room as the winter sun slowly disappeared below the horizon.

"No one to answer to," El whispered, her gaze moving to Mike's

freckled cheeks. "No one chasing me. Just you and me...forever." Her eyes flickered back up to meet Mike's intense amber stare.

He shuffled closer so that their noses touched and playfully nuzzled hers. "Forever." He promised in a returned whisper.

El exhaled deeply, her chest moving with every breath as her focus went between Mike's dark eyes and his full lips. "Mike?" she whispered, her voice filled with emotion.

He gulped quietly as he watched her pupils slowly dilating. "Yeah?" he asked in a hushed voice, his eyes not leaving hers.

El moved her hand onto Mike's chest, her touch stirring a fire in him as her fingers brushed across his sweater until her palm pressed over his pounding heart. "You said that on your birthday you get what you want..."

Mike's stomach did a swoop as nerves built in his body and his heart desperately tried to jump into his throat. His own eyes darkened and widened at the same time as he looked at El's lips, so inviting, so perfect. "What...what do you want?" he whispered in a deep voice.

He could feel El's shaky breath against his lips as she moved even closer to him, her palm on his heart crushed between their joined chests. Mike very slowly and anxiously lifted his eyes from El's lips and onto her captivating eyes. She was already looking at him and she had a glint in her eyes that gave Mike his answer, but she still told him.

"I want *you*."

There was only time for a quivering breath to escape Mike's throat before their lips were joined in a passionate kiss, making him groan in relief and anticipation at their joining. His hand weaved into El's curly locks while her fingers grazed down his chest and then moved to his side, moving up and down his torso as their kisses became open mouthed and breathy.

Mike knew his body was responding to El, it was hard not to when she was so close and kissing him like that. Like he was the most

important thing in her world and it was now or never. He gripped her hair slightly pulling her even closer, leaning back and bringing El along with him.

He was on his back now and El was half on top of him, both of them panting and moaning as their tongues met and stroked. Mike's heart was screaming with excitement as his hands moved up and down her back, his fingers playing with the hem of her sweater as she dominated his mouth, her kisses fiery and mind blowing.

I love you. I love you. I love you. Mike's whole body practically sang the words, never wanting to say it more.

His fingers slipped under the back of El's sweater and she whimpered into his mouth making all the blood rush from Mike's head to low in his pelvis as he groaned in response and tugged her even further on top of him.

This was everything Mike had wanted and more. It was so, so hot, it was beautiful, it was enticing, it was per –

"Mike! Why is the door locked?" came the booming voice of Dustin followed by the rattling of the door handle. "I forgot my key, come on let me in."

Mike closed his eyes and groaned not with sexual frustration or desire, but with pure anger. He was pissed.

El gasped at their interruption and then dropped her head to Mike's heaving chest giggling quietly to herself while he debated murdering Dustin Henderson. "Can you just break his arm or something?" Mike whined to El who was still grinning. "Will can fix it tomorrow."

El laughed shaking her head with mirth and making Mike grin too, he looked up at her, his eyes filled with love, both of them ignoring the calls from Dustin. El eventually sighed and moved off Mike, she smiled at him softly, "next time we won't be interrupted. I promise."

His cheeks filled with even more colour and as Mike hoisted himself off the bed and walked towards the dorm room door he couldn't help but grin foolishly. He had just had the best day of his life with the

most beautiful girl in the world, they had made out with a whisper of something more, and now she was telling him there would be a next time. Mike could certainly live with that.

AN: I'm sorry but Dustin has to ruin precious moments lol It's CANON!

I'm also sorry for any spelling errors or grammar issues in the last section. I didn't have time to proof read tonight as I'm going out but I really wanted to get this chapter out to you. I will edit it later if needed.

Thank you so much for reading! And please let me know what you thought :-D

P.S. It's time for the drama to begin and I'm excited to start writing it as I've been waiting a while for this ;-)

11. Breakthroughs and Declarations

Part of Your World

AN: Okay so this was one of my favourite chapters to write so far for POYW. I really hope you enjoy it! :-)

Chapter 11: Breakthroughs and Declarations

Sunday 9th February 1992

The fog in El's mind seemed like a constant occurrence as she once again found herself facing her past with Mike by her side, *always* by her side.

She closed her eyes taking in a sharp breath and tried to remember everything Mike had said about her emotions being the block and not her powers. El allowed her mind to fill with memories of Brenner when he was her *papa*. When he meant everything to her.

Her thoughts swirled with the echoes of her past, wisped silhouettes playing in her mind's eye showing her a young Eleven in her bed, clinging onto every word her papa said as he read stories to her, captivating her with tales of far off lands.

She remembered the smile on her youthful face when he had first given her a pad of paper and colouring pencils to draw with. She thought back to the potted flowers he would present her with when she behaved during the tests and how he had extended her family, giving her Kali.

Everything had felt right, she had a sister and a father. Never having to worry about a *mother*, not understanding the important role that had been ripped from her life. All she had needed was her papa and she loved him.

El opened her eyes and gasped as sound reverberated inside of the void. Mike clutched her hand tightly, also startled by the new noise in the once silent blank space. It was a voice she knew very well. A

voice that haunted her nightmares and her past.

El's wide hazel eyes searched the fog, taking in how it became lighter, more transparent as in the distance she saw the distinct tall figure, blurred around the edges but very much there. Her body shook and then tensed as she tried to focus on what he was saying, but the words were incoherent, proving that she hadn't completely cleared her mental blockage.

"Ar...there...n...wher...abouts?"

El's heart was hammering in her chest to the point where she could feel the ache against her rib cage. A sweat had appeared on her brow and she slowly looked at Mike to find he was staring back at her, a look of surprise and fear etched into his handsome features. They both tried to refocus on Brenner, he was talking to someone but with him being the only one in the void they could only try and decipher his own questions and answers.

"...why....allow...away?!"

Through his muffled voice it was obvious he was angry, El could practically feel his fury ripple through the thin fog as it pushed against her and Mike's bodies like waves on the shore.

"We need to get closer," Mike whispered looking between El and the silhouetted Brenner. "Do you think you can do that?"

El knew from Mike's calm and supportive voice that he wasn't asking if she could physically get closer to Brenner, but mentally. She tensed her shoulders and felt her jaw tighten as she nodded in response to Mike and then closed her eyes, allowing herself to be taken back to her childhood memories once more.

It was even easier with Brenner's muffled voice already in her ears. She pictured herself sitting on her bed having just got in trouble with papa for wandering out to another level of the lab.

"But why can't I go outside papa?" Five-year-old Eleven whined, swinging her little legs in frustration.

"The outside world is a very dangerous place Eleven. You wouldn't be safe.

You are safe here Eleven. Why would you want to leave? You would leave your sister behind and me. Do you want to leave your papa behind?"

"No!" Eleven said shaking her head, tears brimming in her eyes even at the thought of being without her papa. What would she do without someone to protect her? Papa always protected her from the monsters. He loved her.

El's teeth clenched together and she opened her eyes, fury raging with long forgotten emotions rushing through her blood. He had never loved her, he only wanted to use her for her powers. He loved her powers, not the small child he had ripped from her mother's womb. Angry tears raced down El's cheeks and she didn't even flinch as Brenner came even more into focus.

He was older now of course, time only making him look more dangerous. His white hair short and his face filled with lines as he paced in front of an oak desk. El was too focused on glaring at him to notice that Mike had stiffened up next to her, his own face contorting into anger as he finally looked upon the man who had kidnapped El and changed her whole life. Placing her into a world that she had *never* belonged in.

Brenner was leaning back against his desk and looking ahead as if someone else was stood there. He confirmed the presence of another when he once again spoke, "and remember Miss Frazier, *no one* outside of the immediate team is to know about this. *Especially* Owens. I don't think I can trust him yet..."

El and Mike watched with baited breath as Brenner nodded his head in the direction that they suspected Miss Frazier was standing. He then walked slowly around to sit behind his desk, he looked down at his aged hands pressing the tips of his fingers together, almost making a circular shape.

"You can't hide," he muttered darkly. His words hit El so ferociously that she gasped and pulled her and Mike immediately out of her thoughts of Brenner. She blinked and realised they were just a few feet away from Mike's bed, the void was back to normal and they were alone.

El was breathing heavily, her pounding heart trying desperately to

calm down. She looked up at Mike, finding his eyes on hers and then she was sobbing. Breaking down immediately into his arms as he clutched her to his chest.

"You did so amazing," Mike whispered in a choked voice, his own hands shaking as he stroked her hair and pressed kisses to her forehead. "You are so *strong*," he murmured, repeating the words again and again.

El sniffled blinking away the tears as she shook her head against Mike's chest, inhaling the scent of his laundry detergent on his *Star Wars* t-shirt. "N-no," she gasped as another sob broke from her chest. "I'm not strong."

Mike removed his hands from her waist and hair and moved them so that he was cupping her wet cheeks, making El hesitantly look up and meet his soft and yet determined gaze. "El you *are* strong. I won't have you believe that you're not. You faced him. *You* faced *him*, and I am so *proud* of you."

El gasped, her chest heaving as she tried to control her breathing, keeping her eyes locked with Mike seeking comfort in his beautiful starry eyes. They sparkled with deep fiery amber and told her that what he was saying was true. Or at least *his* truth. El allowed Mike's determination and courage to fill her senses, to make her feel just as brave as him.

His hands were still cupping her cheeks and El brought her palms up clutching onto his arms as she *really* focused on his eyes.

"I really thought he loved me Mike," she whispered, her words etched with pain. "I thought he really had me in that lab to *protect* me. When I...when I realised that I was there for his personal gain it *broke* me. I trusted him, and I thought I loved him too."

"He *never* deserved to be known as your father El," Mike said resolutely, his voice laced with anger and utmost loathing for Brenner while the way he stroked her wet skin with his thumbs was done with the softest of touch. Every glide of his thumb warming her cheeks and easing her tight chest.

"No, he didn't deserve to be known as my father," El agreed, her voice quiet and her eyes full of meaning as she continued to stare at Mike. "He didn't deserve my love..."

Mike's eyes flickered to meet El's, the significance behind her words softening his pupils and making them dilate. "El..." he croaked out, nervously swallowing as his Adam's apple bobbed.

They were truly alone. No one to bother them, no Dustin to interrupt. Only Mike and El, two beating hearts racing in unison.

El waited with baited breath, she could see the words were on the tip of Mike's tongue and she had a sudden urge to say it first.

Without realising it both of them took a deep breath and the three words they had been feeling so *desperately*, both *praying* that the other felt too slipped out of their mouths at the same time.

"I love you."

Mike blinked and El's cheeks blushed, both of them stunned at the joint words and how they could each be hit with such a sudden rush of happiness. Mike laughed in amazement at their timing and El giggled, contentment and joy bubbling up in her chest, too much to even contain as a wide smile curved her lips.

Mike was beaming too, leaning his forehead against hers and exhaling a relieved breath. "I'm sorry I didn't say it sooner," he admitted, a happy grin on his face. "I'm such a mouth breather."

El giggled and shook her head softly making Mike's move along with hers. "Well if you are a mouth breather I must be too." She admitted before pressing her teeth into her lower lip as nervous butterflies filled her stomach. "Because I'm sorry that I didn't say it sooner too Mike. In fact, I think...I think I've always loved you."

His eyes widened in response and El was positive she could hear his pounding heart. Mike moved El closer with his hands still on her cheeks so that their lips were ghosting over one another, their warm sharp breaths mingling. "I never believed in love at first sight until I met you." He whispered, his eyes serious and yet soft in their gaze of

El.

Tears once again filled El's eyes, catching in her lower lashes as she looked up at Mike, breathing him in and feeling her heart tremble. Never before had she felt like this, felt so connected to another person. And as El pushed forward closing the very small gap and kissed Mike with all the love and adoration she felt for him, she knew she was home. And nothing would ever change her mind about that. It had solidified not only into her heart but her whole being. Mike was her world and maybe it was time to declare that to the rest of the universe.

Tuesday 11th February 1992

"I just wanna apologise in advance about Nancy..." Mike mumbled with embarrassment as he walked hand in hand with El towards Dorchester Avenue.

It was college break and after Mike had told Nancy about El and her powers after gaining the mysterious girl's permission of course, his sister had decided it was time for a visit. She insisted it was because Jonathan wanted to see Will and Joyce, but Mike wasn't stupid not to know what Nancy's alternative motives would be.

Of course she wanted to meet El, Jonathan too, and before Mike even knew what was happening, a trip to the bowling alley had been arranged with all of the group meeting at the Byer's house first.

El let out a soft nervous laugh and shrugged her shoulders casually, "I guess I was going to have to meet her at some point," she explained making Mike smile purely because he loved her. He still couldn't believe he had admitted that to El and was even more astonished that she had said it too.

El, the badass, beautiful telekinetic hero *loved* Mike Wheeler the clumsy nerd. Was he dreaming?

"You'll have to meet Holly too at some point," Mike said cheerfully, grinning wider when El looked up at him with interest. He cringed when adding, "and my parents."

"They can't be *that* bad," El reasoned as they carried on down the street, their eyes ahead on Joyce's house that was starting to come into view.

Mike bit his tongue to stop himself from complaining about his parents when he realised how much worse off he could have been. He thought back to seeing Brenner in the void with El and how she had reacted. He felt anger clench at his gut, his eyes flashing with anger for a moment as he realised how much he truly hated that son of a bitch.

"Yeah, they're not that bad." Mike answered as a sudden surge of gratitude washed over him. He *definitely* could have been worse off and decided not to complain about the life he had had so far. He turned his gaze on El again and felt a dopey grin take over his face, besides his life was turning out to be pretty *perfect*.

They were just approaching the steps when Mike tugged gently on El's hand getting her to stop. Before she could ask him why, he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, feeling butterflies soaring in his stomach as she hummed contently against his mouth.

Mike broke the kiss, only pulling away slightly so he could watch El's eyes flutter open, a dazed expression on her face as she looked at him. His heart sang with happiness and he found himself immediately smiling, probably looking incredibly foolish, like his body just couldn't contain how giddy he was feeling.

"I love you," Mike breathed out the words in a happy sigh.

El beamed at him, her eyes sparkling and her perfect pink lips stretching into a grin as she pressed up on her tip toes and placed a tender kiss on his lips. "I love you too," she whispered against his mouth.

"Come on," Mike exhaled with a bashful smile as he carefully laced his fingers with El's, looking down at their joined hands for a moment before looking at her beautiful face. "Let's go face the music."

El chuckled and nodded, her slight nerves when he had met her on the college campus seemed to have dissipated and in its place was an

eager smile that Mike completely adored. He tried to focus on walking up the steps instead of staring at El, but it wasn't exactly easy.

"Mike! El!" Joyce fussed the moment she opened the front door to the young couple, swooping over to hug them both. "Come in, come in. Everyone else is here already." Mike could already tell considering the noise that was coming from the living room.

"Thanks Joyce," he said with a slight smile before he turned back to El and exhaled deeply. "You ready?" he whispered to her, ready for them to leave if this was too much for her.

El seemed to steady herself, taking a deep breath and then fixing her gaze onto Mike as a soft smile lifted her features. "Yes."

Here we go! Mike thought bracingly as he walked towards the living room with his hand in El's while Joyce closed the front door behind them and locked it.

The chatter in the room immediately quietened down as Mike and El walked in, everyone looked at them with knowing smiles before there was a sudden burst of sound making the couple jump.

"Ellie you're here!" Max called first, springing forward to hug El. Mike couldn't help but grin despite the fact that she was pulled from his side. He loved the new friendship that Max and El had built, it seemed really healthy for both of them.

While the girls hugged Mike grinned and patted shoulders with the boys, giving Jonathan a hug. "Hey bud," his soon to be brother in law called warmly as he hugged Mike back.

"If it isn't my little brother," Nancy called, the boys all parting like the red sea to let her walk through. She was so tiny compared to them all that Mike hadn't even noticed her there at first.

"Hey Nance," Mike grinned ignoring the embarrassed blush that was already spreading to his cheeks knowing that his older sister would definitely have fun teasing him in front of El today.

The two siblings stepped forward and hugged, all joking pushed to

the side for a moment as they both secretly relished in the comfort that only a sibling knows. A mutual understanding of each other's past and an unconditional love passing between them. Mike wouldn't say it out loud, but he had definitely missed Nancy, and he could tell by the way she was holding him tight that she had missed him too.

They finally broke apart and Mike exhaled a nervous breath and turned his attention back to El who had just finished being hugged by Dustin. His eyes were still wide with awe and it made Mike want to laugh because it seemed his curly best friend would never get over his fangirling ways.

Mike held his hand out for El and she immediately took it, allowing him to pull her into the centre of the room where his sister was stood, an excited grin on her face as she appraised the very special person in her brother's life.

"Nancy this is El," Mike said trying to contain his foolish grin. "El this is Nancy."

El stretched out her hand and smiled shyly, "it's nice to meet you Nancy."

Nancy grinned at El's politeness and skipped the hand shake and went straight in for a hug, surprising the young girl before she hugged Nancy in return.

"It's really lovely to meet you El," Mike's older sister gushed as she pulled back to look at her again, her eyes dancing over El's features. "Mike has told me all about you and between you and me he never stops talking about you."

The room erupted into laughter except for Mike who groaned and dropped his head into his palm. "Nancy must you do this?" he mumbled.

His sister laughed in response and turned back to a grinning El who couldn't help but be pleased with what she was hearing. "Do you know he actually remembers the date that you two met?" Nancy said with a giggle while Mike continued to go red.

El however only smiled more contently and nodded her head, "yes January 16th."

Mike looked up from his palm, his flushed face turning to El just as she looked back at him with a shy smile. "You remember too?" he croaked nervously.

El grinned and chuckled softly making Mike's heart jump with happiness. "*Of course* I do," she answered easily.

Nancy gasped with delight looking childish as her eyes flicked between the couple. "Okay you two are ridiculously cute." She said with a grin before turning to Jonathan and ushering him forward. "El this is my fiancé Jonathan, and he's also Will's brother."

"Hi El welcome to this crazy family," Jonathan chuckled as he shook hands with the young girl.

Mike watched delight rising into El's eyes at being classed as one of the family, he couldn't help but grin in response, knowing that he always wanted El right here. Not just in the family that was the party, but in the *Wheeler* family too.

He hadn't told anyone yet, but he was on a mission to ask El to be his girlfriend. He knew that everyone already assumed they were dating, and he would be stupid to think she'd say no considering they had exclaimed their love for one another.

But for once Mike wanted to control the situation. He didn't want Dustin walking in, he didn't want to be asking her because something dramatic was happening. No. He just wanted to be in a romantic setting, make everything beautiful for her and then ask if she would consider being his girlfriend.

Even the thought made him giddy and nervous all at once and he exhaled and inhaled a shaky breath which went unnoticed as Joyce walked back into the room with a tray of drinks that Jonathan immediately took off her.

Mike settled down on the couch next to El, both of them holding hands and ignoring the cooing that was coming from Max and Dustin.

Nancy continued to ask El questions and she responded willingly, now and again asking her own questions to Nancy and Jonathan, curious about their lives in New York.

An hour later they all set off for the bowling alley, Joyce waving them off with a smile on her face as she clearly looked forward to a break from the eight kids.

Mike was just securing his scarf when Nancy nudged his shoulder giving him a smirk. "I really like her," she whispered her gaze turning to El for a moment who was adjusting her beanie hat. Nancy looked back at her brother a mixture of teasing fun and yet seriousness in her eyes when she muttered, "don't let her go."

Mike couldn't help but smile in response, his eyes turning softer as he looked over at El who was laughing with Max when the red head joked about her wearing Mike's beanie. "I won't." he said with certainty, his heart rejoicing at the thought of being with El *forever*.

Mike couldn't contain his wide grin the moment the party walked into the bowling alley. It looked like it was stuck in a time capsule from the 80's with its neon signs, deep purple walls and red carpeted floor that led out to the polished wood of the bowling lanes with plush orange leather seats for the game participants.

The place was really busy mainly filled with college students enjoying their break, either crowded around the food merchants, bowling or heading into the small arcade that the alley held. Mike watched Max's eyebrows perk with interest as she looked at the classic arcade games, she had always been the most talented at games like Dragon's Lair and Dig Dug.

"It's a good thing I booked a bowling lane," Nancy laughed as she looked around at all of the students while the group followed her towards the desk where they could pay and collect their bowling shoes.

Mike turned to El and smiled, watching her as she took in all the sights and sounds of the bowling alley. The sound of crashing pins come just be heard over the loud speakers currently playing a new

song called '*Jump*' by Kris Kross.

"What do you think?" he asked her eagerly.

El looked up at Mike grinning and shouting over the music, "it looks fun!" Mike nodded in understanding smiling brightly, his teeth looking pearly white under the neon lights.

They queued at the desk, taking their turn to grab shoes off the attendant. Mike crouched down tying El's bowling shoes for her while she blushed with pleasure watching him.

"Right so there's eight of us, how do we want to split the teams?" Max called enthusiastically, her eyes competitive and ready to begin the first round. They had paid for three rounds, knowing it would be easier to get a clear winner out of the game.

"How about Team Disney verses Team Star Wars?" Nancy chuckled moving over to the electronic keyboard that was hooked up to the chunky television that hung above the polished bowling lane.

Mike rolled his eyes knowing that Nancy was referring to his and El's ongoing debate that he had brought up with his sister.

"Works for me," Max said cheerfully taking a seat on the orange leather bench.

"Me too," El grinned while Mike smirked at her, both of them narrowing their eyes playfully at one another.

"You know I'll win right?" he teased her, squeezing their joined hand and looking into her mischievous eyes.

"Oh, I don't think so," El challenged with a quirked eyebrow. Mike felt his heart racing once again, blood rushing through his body as he tried not to think about how sexy she looked, especially when she was flirting.

"Yeah El no cheating using your pow – using your talent." Dustin shouted over the music, correcting himself and smiling apologetically when Mike glared at him for his slip up.

The Star Wars team was made up of Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Jonathan and Team Disney consisted of El, Nancy, Max and Will who had shrugged to the other boys' dismay saying he kind of preferred Disney.

"And it has nothing to do with me being gay," he told the boys pointedly as if expecting them to tease him. "I just prefer them." He added with a smile when the boys all looked thoroughly betrayed while Team Disney laughed.

While there was a lot of goading and teasing that went on between the two teams as the game began, it soon faded with a lot of the members intermingling. Max was sat on Lucas's lap as they occasionally made out, Nancy was giggling with Jonathan when he whispered in her ear and Will and Dustin joked about their friends.

Mike was sat next to El, his arm slung over the back of the bench while she snuggled into his side making him warm and unbelievably happy. It was hard to believe that El hadn't *always* been here enjoying nights out as a fully-fledged party member. Mike could hardly remember his life before El, his whole heart now consumed by her.

He loved watching her bowling, the concentration that made her lips pout and her brow lower as she swung her arms and released the ball. Mike's eyes would watch the ball as he mumbled "come on" under his breath, knowing he shouldn't really be supporting an opposing team member but making an exception for El.

She wasn't great at bowling, but she certainly wasn't terrible either. Her ball knocked down four pins and El rejoiced, jumping up and down with excitement. Mike couldn't take his eyes off her, hurrying through his own go so that he could sit back down and stare at her.

El had been getting progressively better, finding a ball that was the perfect weight for her and refining her game play as she slid the ball down the shiny lane for the first time in the third game.

Mike watched with baited breath as the ball flew down the alley right in the centre heading straight for the middle pin. Everyone gasped in anticipation as the sound of pins being crashed into filled the air, the

computer monitor voice shouting "*strike!*"

El whirled around, bemused shock on her face, her jaw dropping as she laughed while her team cheered and applauded, and Mike grinned so widely that he knew he looked like a total sap. But he didn't care.

He stood up moving towards El as she rushed to him, immediately launching herself into his arms and emitting an excited squeal at her success. "Did you see that?!" She gasped happily, her hands on Mike's shoulders as she pulled away enough to beam up at him. "I got a *strike!*"

Mike chuckled through his grin, his eyes bright and happy. "You did *amazing*," he told her adoringly as he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her nose making her giggle and blush a pretty pink.

Large silver trays of pizza and buckets of fries were brought over by the waitress as the party took a break to sit down and eat. Max wandered off to the arcade after a while, the call of the game machines too much for her to bare. Lucas, Dustin and Will followed her like eager puppies while Jonathan and Nancy headed to the ice hockey machine.

Mike and El were still sat on the orange bench, both facing each other and grinning as they ate pizza and fries. His arm was resting again across the top of the leather seat and occasionally El would lean her head against it, making them both smile bashfully.

"Are you having fun?" Mike grinned already knowing the answer as he stared at El, too caught up in her beauty to care about food right now.

El immediately nodded, her wide smile showing off her white teeth as she picked up another slice of pizza. "It's been the *best* night of my life," she answered truthfully, her eyes stunning Mike completely.

He watched her and felt his heart picking up speed all over again. There was just something about this moment, seeing her eyes completely free of trauma, seeing her be *El*. Truly and completely El. It was captivating, and it made Mike act foolishly.

She bit into her pizza slice, snorting with amusement when she pulled off most of the cheese in one go. The action caused tomato sauce to brush against her chin, but Mike had never thought anyone looked more beautiful. And he had never loved *anyone* like he loved her.

He stared at her, his eyes soft and his palms clammy. His heart beating loudly for her and *only* her.

"El will you be my girlfriend?"

It took a moment for Mike to even realise that the blurted out words had come out of *his* mouth. He froze in surprise, El frowning at his mumbled words and leaning in, "can you say that again?" she shouted in confusion. "I couldn't hear you over the music."

Mike closed his eyes for a moment. *So much for a romantic way to ask her to be my girlfriend you idiot!* He reprimanded himself.

And it wasn't *exactly* what you could call romantic. They were in a sweaty out-dated bowling alley which was filled with college students laughing loudly and goading each other, El had pizza sauce on her chin and there was a song called 'I Wanna Sex You Up' blasting out of the speakers. *Great...just great.*

Mike opened his eyes and swallowed nervously, his gaze dancing over El's face watching her own curious expression to his reaction for a moment. He looked down and reached for her free hand that wasn't holding her pizza slice.

He shuffled closer and leaned his head towards hers, his heart in his throat when she too pulled her body nearer to his. He didn't think he would ever get used to having El this close but right now she deserved an answer to his question and Mike would be damned if he put this off any longer.

"El," Mike began trying to shout over the music but also trying to sound sincere at the same time. In the next few seconds two things happened at once, the music was changing and so the volume had significantly reduced exactly when Mike shouted at the top of his lungs, "WILL YOU BE MY GIRLFRIEND?!"

El jumped back slightly from their proximity and Mike turned immediately bright red as he realised he had practically screamed in her face. What also didn't help was that other college students had heard his shouted exclamation and were hooting or wolf whistling the couple.

Mike gulped, feeling like his entire body was on fire as embarrassment flooded his senses as quickly as a tidal wave. He closed his eyes tight not even wanting to see El's reaction. "Excuse me while I go throw myself in a hole," he croaked out once again having to shout over the new song.

Mike stood up and could barely open his eyes again before he felt a hand clamp on his arm. He looked around slowly and anxiously to see El had stood up too. He expected to find her looking mortified, but she was smiling, *really* smiling. Her eyes dancing with a mixture of mirth and love and her smile playful and happy.

El wrapped her arms around Mike's neck while he looked at her through wild surprised eyes. She leaned up and kissed him, her lips eager and beckoning making him completely melt into her touch. His arms encircled her waist as he pulled her closer, their chests crushing together as their lips parted and their tongues met as the passion between them built rapidly.

They only pulled away when the catcalls got particularly loud and they realised with dazed expressions on their faces that practically the whole bowling alley had stopped their activities to watch them. Nancy was playfully cringing at seeing her brother making out, Jonathan was chuckling next to her. Lucas, Dustin and Will were cheering and Max...well Max was still playing Dig Dug, quite oblivious.

Mike and El turned back to look at each other, Mike sighed happily, a dopey grin curved his lips. "So, do I take that as yes?" he teased making El giggle and nod her head happily.

"Absolutely," she replied breathlessly, her eyes wide with love. "I want nothing more than to be your girlfriend Mike."

They smiled at each other, giddy, excited and happy, so happy. Mike

rubbed the pizza sauce off El's chin making her laugh before they were kissing again, slipping into their own world, ignoring everything else.

Maybe asking El to be his girlfriend hadn't gone *exactly* to plan, but Mike couldn't help but feel like it was perfect still. They were both so happy and so in love. Could it get any better than that?

Friday 14th February 1992

El had been having the best week of her life. She was able to get out of the warehouse without much complaint now that Kali believed she was focusing on looking for Brenner, which in a way she *was*, but that took place in the night when El had Mike by her side in the peace of the void.

She had met Nancy and really liked Mike's sister, especially when she shared stories about a young Michael Wheeler doing something embarrassing or sweet. Mike might not have appreciated the stories but El certainly did, wanting to know *everything* there was to know about her boyfriend.

Her boyfriend.

El couldn't help the wide and dazed grin on her face as she made her way to the college campus where she was meeting Mike. This week had just been magical, El getting to experience going bowling with the party, watching movies together, eating out at diners and even laughing through her inauguration into the party.

It was very simple and had consisted of El sitting around the make shift D&D table while she repeated the party rules:

Friends Don't Lie.

When a party member requires assistance, it is your duty to provide that assistance.

Don't intentionally put the party in jeopardy.

Party secrets stay in the party.

In celebration of El becoming an official member of the party, the group all ate Eggo's and played a game of D&D, Mike proudly introducing El's new character, the Mage. Her heart tingled with love and joy as he looked up at her, his lopsided smile completely melting her into a puddle.

And now here El was, on her way to spend another fun filled day with her *boyfriend*. She shook her head knowing that the concept of belonging to Mike and him belonging to her would never get old. It made her practically beam knowing she *meant something* to someone, someone so incredibly special.

El adjusted her red dress as she walked feeling thankful that the bitter cold was very slowly ebbing away, buds appearing on the bare trees in the Plaisance Park. It didn't mean it was warm though, and she was thankful for the knitted black tights that kept her legs warm, the black boots on her feet and Mike's winter coat that she had unzipped to stop herself from overheating.

She clutched onto her bag, having got changed in a restroom because she didn't want Kali or the gang questioning her more formal attire. They had stopped mentioning her soft sweaters and even her skirts, but she didn't think they would allow this long-sleeved red lace dress to go unnoticed.

El knew she was dressed up, but there was good reason for it. Today was Valentine's day. It was a day that held no significance to El until yesterday when Max and Nancy had pulled her to the side in the Byer's house and asked her what she was getting Mike for the special day.

She had been horrified not knowing about the holiday and was curious why Mike hadn't even mentioned it. Nancy said it would have been because her brother wouldn't expect anything from El, although she laughed with certainty that Mike will have gotten El something.

This left her in a dilemma of trying to find out what to get her boyfriend on their first Valentine's day together. El had made her excuses and left the Byer's house much to Mike's disappointment, kiss him yearningly and promising to meet him the next day at the college.

In reality she had spent the rest of the afternoon rushing around stores in a panic, looking at the Valentine's day displays which seemed to be centred more towards women than men. At first she had cringed when she noticed the women's lingerie, sheer red material or French lace displayed on mannequins. But after a while she found herself staring at the lingerie as an idea sparked in her brain. There was something she could give Mike, something no one else would ever get and something that she wanted only *him* to have.

Nerves and excitement mixed into butterfly form in El's stomach as she rushed out of the store and headed to a pharmacy, blushing as she tried to choose a packet of condoms without much knowledge behind her decision. El was tempted to shop lift the box, not wanting the embarrassment of buying them. But then she exhaled, trying to fill her body with courage as she headed towards the cash register, reminding herself that she was trying to change her past behaviour.

El managed to pick up a few small gifts for Mike, her heart still beating fast with adrenaline as she tried not to smile too much about her *real* present. Her plan was to spend the day with Mike and then suggest they got back to his dorm room. El was sure Dustin wouldn't be a problem this time as Mike had already explained that him and Will were going to have a movie marathon and probably a sleepover while Nancy and Jonathan went on a date night. Max had gone to stay with Lucas at his dorm which she did on a regular basis.

It seemed like everything had slotted into place and El entered the campus with a determined grin on her face. Today she was going to give her *all* to Mike and she couldn't wait.

It wasn't long before El spotted Mike sitting on the steps of the computer science building. Her eyes lingered on a red gift bag next to him and she smiled warmly as she turned her gaze back onto her boyfriend. Her heart was in her throat, excitement and nerves bubbling in her stomach as she approached him.

"Good morning," El said softly making Mike jump from where he had been anxiously twiddling his thumbs.

He looked up at her, his surprised face lifting immediately into a wide grin, his dark starry eyes practically glowing. Mike stumbled to

his feet, always clumsy no matter what. He didn't respond with words at first, hurrying down the remaining steps to El before his hands cupped her cheeks and he pulled her into a lingering kiss that made her sigh with contentment. She was finally *home*.

El smiled against Mike's lips, kissing him back with vigour as her heart soared and her whole body filled with warmth. They eventually pulled away gently, matching grins on their faces as Mike nuzzled his nose against El's. "Good morning beautiful," he finally replied in a happy sigh.

El giggled, unable to contain how giddy she felt. Being in love with Mike was the best feeling in the world.

"Happy Valentine's day," El said grinning as she reached for Mike's hand and entwined her fingers with his.

He laughed softly and grinned back, a dopey smile on his lips. "Happy Valentine's day. I wasn't sure if you knew about this holiday," he said gently, his eyes kind and tender as he stared at her. El loved the way he looked at her, it made her feel beautiful.

"Nancy and Max told me about it yesterday," El admitted with a chuckle before poking Mike playfully in the chest making him gasp with laughter. "*Someone* decided not to tell me!" she said to him teasingly, unable to stop grinning.

"I just didn't want you to have to worry about it," Mike said once his laughter died down, his hands moving to El's waist as she shivered with pleasure at the heat of his palms against the red lace dress.

"Well I was worried when I had to find you a gift last minute," El replied playfully telling Mike off whose eyebrows rose in surprise at her words.

"You got me a gift?" he asked bemused while El nodded and grabbed her bag, carefully routing through it before she pulled out a card and two wrapped presents.

Mike's eyes were even wider when El happily handed over the gifts and red sealed card. He seemed in disbelief and he blinked, his eyes

vulnerable as he looked at his girlfriend. "No one has ever got me anything for Valentine's day before," he admitted.

El's gaze immediately softened and she smiled loving at him, "well we will have *plenty* of Valentine's days to make up for that." Her words were filled with determination but also a promise. A promise that they would have the rest of their lives to celebrate their love.

Mike grinned, his vulnerability disappearing and being replaced with assurance, trust and warmth. "Promise?" he whispered delicately as his eyes locked with El's.

She squeezed their joined hand and leaned up on her tip toes, kissing the tip of Mike's nose and smiling. "*Promise.*"

Mike beamed with happiness and playfully pulled El over to the steps, both of them sitting down and exchanging gifts. "I'm going to open this later if that's okay?" Mike said indicating to his card and tucking it inside of his jacket.

El nodded with a smile as she peaked into the bag and pulled out her own card, eagerly unsealing the envelope and pulling out a cute Valentine's card that had two bears on the front cover. El couldn't help but laugh with warmth as she realised Mike had drawn two Eggos on the front making it look like the bears were holding them.

She tentatively opened the card and carefully read through Mike's messy scrawl, smiling to herself softly as she followed his words.

El,

I can't believe that I actually get to write you a Valentine's card and call you my girlfriend!

You are the kindest, brave and most beautiful girl I have ever met. Thank you for saving me. It has been the best 27 days of my life and I know with you by my side every day will be better than the last.

I love you.

Mike x

"Oh *Mike*," El said in a choked voice, her chest suddenly heavy as she tried desperately not to cry.

"Do you like it?" he asked her hesitantly, nerves in his voice as he watched her staring down at the card as her finger delicately touched the kiss mark.

El looked up, her eyes watery but filled with adoration for the man who had stolen her heart. She never wanted him to return it. "I love it. I love *you*," she said softly, leaning in to press a tender kiss on Mike's lips, making him smile gently as he watched her move onto the main present.

"Now if you don't like this, I can always return it," Mike called as El ripped off the haphazardly wrapped paper, gasping in surprise and utter delight when she looked down at her gift.

It was a plush yellow fish teddy, with blue stripes, bright eyes and a big smile. It was *Flounder*, one of El's favourite characters from *The Little Mermaid*. The one that she had told Mike she adored. And now she had her very own version.

"So?" Mike asked with a large grin, "what do you think?"

El laughed, amazement and happiness filling her features. She turned to face Mike, cupping his cheek and stroking along his cheekbone with her finger tips. "I *think* I love you even more!"

Mike chuckled, the sound muffled as El leaned in for another kiss which he enthusiastically responded to. His own hand moved to her curls, tangling into the brown locks and pulling her closer if that was at all possible.

"Why don't you open your presents?" El finally asked, breathless from their kiss that had ending after becoming something much softer than the passion that had started the embrace.

"Okay," Mike said happily as he started to pull off the wrapping paper. El bit her tongue, stopping herself from telling him that they weren't the main present, but then she would have only blushed if he had questioned her on what *was*.

Mike chuckled as he pulled the paper off a Reese's Peanut Butter shaped heart. "How did you know this was my favourite chocolate?" he asked with amusement as he looked up at his girlfriend with a warm grin.

"Nancy," El admitted wishing she could say she just *knew*.

"Ah," Mike laughed shaking his head with mirth before he pulled another present out of El's gift bag and handed it over with a smile. "Well great minds think alike!"

She ripped off the wrapping paper and laughed, seeing that Mike had got her an identical Reese's heart. "Thank you," she told him with a sweet smile before urging him to open his other present.

Mike was more delicate with taking off the paper for this present, noticing that it was more fragile. At first, he couldn't see what the silver chain was but when he turned it around he gasped in happy surprise. It was a death star on a key ring, but a Disney castle had been stuck to the front of it.

"It's the best of both worlds," El explained looking between Mike and the present she had created with the help of a bottle of glue and two different key rings.

Mike admired the two symbols representing him and El, his smile gentle and his eyes soft as he traced the designs with his finger. "Your world and my world, but as one," he said in awe, his voice quiet.

El beamed, knowing he understood the sentiment behind the present. Mike *always* understood. He looked up at her and grinned, leaning in to kiss her softly, "I love you and this present." He whispered. "Thank you."

El sighed happily, leaning her forehead against Mike's and closing her eyes contently for a moment, "you're welcome," she replied in an equally quiet and tender voice.

Now that their presents had been exchanged, Mike and El properly started their day. They walked hand in hand, stealing glances at each other and grinning dopey smiles.

Mike took El to the Navy Pier, somewhere she had only passed with longing glances but never got to enjoy before. They ate hot doughnuts from the food stall, rode the Ferris wheel, roller coaster and the Carousel, all the while laughing and grinning like the fools in love that they were.

El stopped them by the photobooth, pulling Mike inside and insisting that they get some photographs, not that he was hesitant, having wanted a photo of El for a while now. For the strip of four they both grinned, pulled faces, laughed and then kissed. Mike bought two copies, smiling bashfully as he handed El her strip of photos and watched her coo happily over the images.

Before either of them knew it, the sun was starting to set on another day in Chicago. Mike bought them two hot chocolates with cream and they clasped hands strolling across the docks sipping on their warm drinks. El vaguely realised that they weren't far from the warehouse but decided not to bring it up. It did however spark a realisation in her that she had been wanting to talk to Mike about since they had first said I love you in the void.

El slowed down her walking pace making Mike stop too as he turned to her, a gentle curiosity on his face as he smiled at her. "I wanted to talk to you about something," she started to explain trying to ease her beating heart by taking a deep breath. "I want to tell Kali about you Mike."

Her boyfriend's eyebrows rose dramatically, and his mouth opened slightly in surprise. "You *do*?" Mike croaked before clearing his throat. "I mean...won't she be pissed?"

El laughed nervously and nodded, "she will *definitely* be pissed. But I deserve it, I've lied to her Mike. It's about time I told her the truth." She said feeling the familiar guilt lurking back into her body.

"Do you want me to be there...when you tell her I mean." Mike asked, his own breathing slightly heightened as adrenaline rushed through them both at the thought of their relationship no longer being a secret.

"No," El grinned shaking her head for good measure. "I'm not

expecting her to take it very well at first. But I'm hoping...I'm hoping that when I explain how much you have helped me with Brenner, how good you are for me and how I love you, that'll she will understand."

Mike smiled softly at El's words but then his grin dropped as he sighed heavily. "And if she doesn't understand?" he whispered, fear etched into his voice.

El felt her heart stop for a moment at the thought of being forbidden from seeing Mike. She couldn't even handle imagining that pain. She shook her head resolutely and squeezed his hand, "that won't stop us being together."

Mike exhaled in relief and a smile slowly curved back onto his lips. "Good," he breathed out the word as he leaned down and kissed El, making her smile against his mouth as she kissed him back, feeling a happy fluttering in her chest.

They continued to walk, making their way to the dorm and laughing as El bobbed cream onto Mike's nose before kissing it off. Everything was peaceful and perfect...until she felt a shiver run down her spine.

El stopped, making Mike come to a halt too. He looked down at her in confusion, but she didn't offer any response as she looked around, her heart picking up so much speed that she could hear her pulse pounding in her ears.

"El?" Mike asked concerned, still unable to get his girlfriend's attention as she whipped her head around the darkening streets.

They were being watched. She could feel it from the adrenaline pumping in her veins and the cold shudder playing at the back of her neck. El's breathing was heavy, Mike repeatedly asking her what was wrong became only a murmur as she tried to concentrate.

Her eyes went from the store fronts, to the parked cars, to passers-by on the streets before connecting with a pair of eyes, half concealed by the dark of the alleyway. El gasped, her expressive stare widening with fear.

It was man she had never seen before. A man that reacted immediately to her eye contact, stepping closer from his hiding place.

"El what's – "

"Mike," El interrupted urgently, beads of sweat erupting on her skin as her heart threatened to burst out of her chest. Mike looked back at her with wild eyes, his gaze dancing across her face trying to understand her fear. "We need to go. *Now.*"

AN: Ahhhhhh! Lovely readers what did you think?! And what are your thoughts about what's going to happen next?!

12. Hide and Seek

Part of Your World

AN: I just want to thank you all so much for the reviews and feedback so far. I appreciate you taking the time to share your thoughts and I love you all!

With that being said, please fasten your seatbelt as the drama is about to begin!

Chapter 12: Hide and Seek

Friday February 14th 1992

"El what's – "

"Mike," El interrupted urgently, beads of sweat erupting on her skin as her heart threatened to burst out of her chest. Mike looked back at her with wild eyes, his gaze dancing across her face trying to understand her fear. "We need to go. Now."

Mike's heart was in his throat as he watched the terror in El's eyes. It was enough to make his own eyes widen, his stomach to twist in knots and cause adrenaline to flood into his veins. "El I don't un – "

Before he could get another word out El had grabbed his hand and was running, making him stumble along before he found his feet and ran in pace with his girlfriend. Their hot chocolate take-out cups fell in the process but there was no time to even look back.

"We need to keep moving," El said in a rush, her voice heavy with determination and fear.

Mike gasped as he tried to ease his pounding heart, but it was no use. "El, what's going on?" he hurried to ask as El made them take a sharp turn down an unknown street. For a moment Mike thought they were heading back to the pier but they seemed to veer off.

"I-Is it the lab? Is it Brenner?" Mike struggled to say as he tried to get

air into his tight lungs as his legs complained from the running that his long limbs weren't used to.

El managed to shake her head despite how quickly she was moving. "No, it wasn't him," she said slightly out of breath before she looked behind them while still running. "But we have to hide!"

Mike nodded, his jaw clenched as he finally allowed the adrenaline in his system to overtake his senses. There was more power to his strides, his feet stronger with every quick step as El led him away into the shadows of the night.

"El where are we going?" Mike croaked out, his voice constricting from a combination of fear and the rush of bitter cold air being forced down his throat.

El didn't answer as she tightened her grip on his arm, her focus split between running at full speed and looking behind her shoulder before they would dart down another street. There was a lot of people still out in the Chicago Valentine's evening, and yet no one paid any attention to the frantic couple running for their lives.

Mike watched the streets become fewer as they headed towards the water front, the lights of the pier in the distance startled him as he realised how different their night had been only minutes earlier. Now everything had changed.

"This way," El whispered breathlessly as she pulled Mike towards what looked like a large number of dilapidated warehouses if the smashed windows and rusted metal was anything to go by.

El moved with purpose and Mike couldn't shake the feeling that she knew where she was going. Had she hidden in these warehouses before? He gulped down his anxiety at the opposing looking buildings and allowed her to guide him towards a concealed warehouse near the back of the dock.

Mike held on tightly to El's hand as she finally slowed down her run, turning her worried gaze onto the dock one more time before she pushed open a rickety side door of the warehouse. She tugged Mike inside with her and he was met with darkness, he squinted as he tried

to take in the shadows of the large space while El closed the door.

She moved a scrap of metal sheeting away from a few holes in the rusted exterior wall and pressed her face up to the very small gap, staring out at the dock. "I think we lost him," El whispered, her breath coming out harsh as her chest heaved from their frantic running.

Mike had a sheen of sweat across his brow as he bent down placing his hands on his knees, closing his eyes and trying to control his pants. He felt a mixture of relief and fear trying to settle within his body, but most of all he was confused.

"Was it...someone from the lab?" Mike asked between heavy breaths as he stood back up tall, his eyes on El as she continued to look through the small peep hole, her shoulders tense.

"I don't know," she replied in a hushed whisper. "I've never seen him before."

Mike ran a shaky hand through his hair, as he tried to calm himself down. His body was still trembling from adrenaline and he found his gaze flickering across the space as his eyes slowly adjusted to the dark. "Where are we?" he asked with a frown. "How did you know to come here?"

El slowly looked over her shoulder at Mike, a sad sigh leaving her as she picked up the metal sheeting, fixing it back into position before reaching for a switch. The whole room suddenly filled with light, the hum of the old hanging strips of light breaking through the silence as Mike gaped at the space.

"This is where I live," El finally replied weakly, her eyes averting from Mike's as if she was ashamed to admit this.

Mike took in the living area, crates that had been made into furniture, old rickety tables filled with what looked like floor plans; a deck of cards still laid out on the hard wood. There was a small narrow hallway that seemed to lead off to what looked like an industrial kitchen.

He blinked looking from the now apparent living area and turned his attention back onto El, noticing her reluctance and the blush in her cheeks. Mike frowned and didn't hesitate to walk to her, closing the distance between them.

"Hey," he whispered, his hand cupping her cheek and lifting her head up in the process. Their eyes locked and Mike softened at the vulnerability in his girlfriend's hazel eyes. "It doesn't matter. It's okay that this is where you've been living. As long as you have been safe, that's all I care about." He added with a gentle smile, wanting her to know he wasn't mad that she had never told him her living arrangements before.

El's eyes warmed and her smile reflected her relief for a moment before reality crashed down into both of them. "I can't believe I have seen the man following us," she said breathlessly.

Mike immediately frowned, his forehead creasing with confusion and worry. "Wait...this person has already been following you?"

El sighed and entwined their fingers, it took Mike until this point to realise she was still holding the gift bag containing their Valentine's presents. It seemed like the moment of sharing gifts, peaceful and blissfully ignorant to the darker side of the world had ended for Mike.

"I had never seen the person before, so I couldn't be sure. But I had a feeling I was being watched." El explained, her voice shaking slightly. "It wasn't until tonight that I saw *him*."

"What did he look like?" Mike asked in a whisper, his heart racing and his eyes wild with fear as he watched El closely.

She frowned, deep in thought for a moment. "It was so dark...but he was tall and broad. He looked *strong*."

Mike didn't know what to say so merely nodded in answer, his stomach twisting into nerves at the thought of what could have happened if the man had caught them. He exhaled deeply and then looked around the space as a thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Wait, where are the others? Kali and the rest of the gang?"

El sighed and walked towards a set of metal stairs, pulling Mike along with her by their joined hands. "Shop lifting," she explained in a murmur with a shrug of her shoulders. "They will have gone for food."

"Right," Mike said clearing his throat awkwardly. He couldn't exactly condone their methods of getting supplies, but he knew he could never understand their situation. No matter what his parents' failures were, he was brought up in a loving household which was financially stable. He had never had to experience hardship, at least not like El and the others had.

"Where are we going?" Mike couldn't help but ask in confusion as they reached the top of the stairs and walked down a rickety hallway, heading towards a door at the end of the corridor.

El looked over her shoulder at Mike as she carried on pulling him along. A weak but soft smile curved on her lips, "my room."

"Oh...okay," Mike replied in a slightly high-pitched voice. When El smirked playfully and looked back towards the hallway Mike took the opportunity to smack his forehead with his free hand. It was times like this that he really hated being himself. They had just escaped death and yet here he was thinking about sex. God he really *was* a mouth breather.

"What do you think?" El asked anxiously as she flicked the switch on the wall and her bedroom came to light in a hue of warm yellow. She walked over to her bed, dropping down the gift bag and turning on another switch so that fairy lights that had been strung to the ceiling added a glittering sparkle to the room.

Mike looked around, his eyes wide in awe and his mouth open slightly. He looked from the mix matched furniture, the pink and purple patchwork duvet on the small bed, the small television and VCR, the small pile of videos and then back onto the fairy lights that added warmth to the space.

He turned his focus back onto El who had sank down onto her bed,

sitting on the edge as she stared at Mike with an openness back in her eyes. He smiled softly at her, feeling his heart ache with love. "It's really nice El," he told her soothingly, hoping his words would erase her concerns.

She exhaled in relief and shuffled up her bed slightly so that her back was against the white painted brick wall. Mike eyed the space next to her and nervously shuffled forward until he was sat beside his girlfriend. He eased his shoulders back, so they rested on the wall before he turned his attention onto El.

"Are you okay?" he asked her in a whisper as he reached for her hand. They both watched their fingers instinctively lock together like two jigsaw pieces. The way they fitted together so perfectly amazed Mike, it was like they had been made for one another. Two different souls, two *completely* different lives, but perfectly created to fit together. *Soul mates*.

El laughed nervously, her voice a little breathy. "I don't know if okay is the right word," she admitted looking down at their entwined hands. "We've just had to run for our lives and I don't think I'll ever be safe..." she sighed closing her eyes.

Mike frowned, his chest squeezing painfully at the sorrow etching into El's beautiful features. "Hey," he said softly, his free hand reaching for her, his fingers as soft as cotton as they brushed a few wild curly strands away from her face.

El opened her eyes and look up at Mike, a heavy sigh leaving her chest as she stared back at him. He continued to stroke her hair, slowly and lovingly. "You're safe right now." Mike assured El with a gentle smile. "You're safe with *me*. *Always*."

There was silence between the couple for the moment as the words Mike spoke resonated in both of their hearts. Their chests rose and fell heavily, their breath coming out harsh as their throats grew dry and they moved closer.

El's eyes flickered over Mike's, drinking in his words until they filled her heart with comfort and love. She smiled back as anticipation glistened in her eyes. It was a look that made Mike's heart race and

for his skin to go clammy as El's face was mere inches from his own.

"Always." She whispered in response as Mike's eyes slipped closed, his mouth slightly open as El's lips found his. He exhaled deeply, her breath and scent mixing into an intoxicating blend that made him groan with need.

El's arms flung around his neck in one movement and then Mike's fingers were getting lost into her curly hair as he pulled her closer, their lips crashing together. El's mouth coaxed Mike's open again and then their tongues met in a passionate embrace fighting for control as they both moaned from the desire that stirred and burned in their bodies.

"I love you," Mike gasped desperately in between hot and needy kisses, wanting her to know how important she was to him. "I would do anything for you" he breathed heavily against her mouth as El whimpered and pulled his bottom lip between her teeth.

"I love you too, so much," El said in a choked voice, her emotions incredibly evident in their moment of passion.

"Well, well, well...what do we have here?" came a male's sneering voice that made both El and Mike gasp as they jumped away from each other. Their eyes widened and their jaws slacked with shock as they stared at five people stood in the door way.

Mike gulped nervously, his eyes darting over the newcomers. While the sneering voice belonged to a tall man who looked intimidating with a mohawk, it was *nothing* compared to the anger and fire that were emitting from the shortest member of the group.

Mike realised instantly with a heavy feeling in his heart, that it was Kali.

Shit.

El thought her heart was beating madly during her passionate embrace with Mike, her body still tingling from his touch. And yet it was nothing compared to the erratic pounds her beating muscle was

making against her ribcage as she stared wide eyed at her sister.

Kali seemed to be frozen in shock, her whole body looked rigid except for her dark eyes which were flicking between El and Mike so rapidly that it looked painful. What terrified El most was the burning rage she could see so evident in her sister. Her stomach plunged from the guilt she had felt for weeks, all of the fault and lies crashing down on her.

"Kali," El exhaled in a sharp breath as she stood up quickly from her bed. She distinctly felt Mike stand up too and she couldn't help but walk slightly in front of him as an act of protection. She really didn't know what her sister would do.

Kali's body seemed to be waking up from the shock and she clenched her fists, her eyes now fixed directly on Mike who was bravely looking back at her. "Who. Is. *This*?" Kali practically hissed through her gritted teeth.

El swallowed nervously, not for one minute taking her eyes off her sister. She didn't even notice the way the rest of the gang were looking between them all. Funshine with concern etched over his face, Mick shuffled awkwardly, and Axel and Dottie grinned in amusement.

"Kali," El croaked out, her heart beat so loud in her ears that she was probably talking too loud for the situation. "This is Mike, he's my – "

"He's your *what*?" Kali shouted harshly as she walked closer to the couple, her body trembling with anger. "He's the reason you've been *lying* to me for *weeks*?! He's the reason you have put us all in *danger*?!"

Tears spilled down El's cheeks and she gasped trying to control her breathing. "Kali just listen – "

"No!" Kali practically screamed, her chest heaving with outrage. She turned her eyes onto Mike and glared at him fiercely. "Get. Out. *Now*."

El heard Mike huff out an exasperated and harsh laugh. "Like hell I'm

going to leave her with *you*! She didn't do anything wrong. Maybe if you weren't so *controlling* she wouldn't have had to hide our relationship in the first place!"

"Oh, so you two have a *relationship*?" Kali mocked while Axel and Dottie sniggered. She turned her dark and dangerous gaze onto El. "So, all of this time you *told* me you were out searching for Brenner you were with *him*?! Have you done *anything* to help us win this battle?!"

"Don't talk to her like that!" Mike shouted stepping forward, courage replacing the fear in his eyes as he reached for El's hand, she took it gladly despite how much she was shaking. "She was searching for Brenner *every night*! What the hell have *you* been doing huh?!"

Panic sparked in El's skin at the way Kali was glaring at Mike and she knew she needed to speak up before anything terrible could happen. "Kali I'm sorry," she gasped, her wet eyes trying to beseech her sister who had reluctantly moved her death glare from Mike and back onto her sister.

"Mike is the man I s-saved that night in the park. I couldn't just forget about him Kali, we...we have something *special* – "Axel laughed at this and El winced at his harsh tone. Mike squeezed her hand, giving her the support to finish what she had started.

"Mike is telling the truth about me searching for Brenner. And with him by my side I've almost cracked it. I'm *so* close Kali. I have seen Brenner, I've *heard* him."

At these words the fire in Kali's eyes flinched slightly as a very small part of the anger in her body cracked away. "What do you mean with *him* by your side?" she asked darkly, her eyes looking at Mike with disdain.

El gulped nervously, her face tight with fear as she stared at her sister. "I...I bring him into the void with me. He protects me, he loves – "

"*Enough!*" Kali shouted her eyes flaring back up as she looked at Mike. "He's *using* you! He is just a filthy *boy* who has seen a vulnerable girl

and – "

"How *dare* you!" Mike shouted with fury and utter disbelief in his voice. "I *love* her! I love her for who she *is*!"

El couldn't stop the tears streaming down her face as she looked between her boyfriend and her sister. "Kali please!" she pleaded, sniffing and blinking away the glazing water in her eyes. "I'm *sorry* for lying to you. I am so sorry! But I can't apologise for loving Mike. I *can't*!"

Kali ignored El's words and turned her deadly focus back onto Mike. "You need to leave *now*," she said fiercely before looking at her sister. "And *we* need to go and *never* come back. You have both put us in danger and we will only be safe if we leave this city."

"You can't do that!" Mike shouted as horror filled his eyes at the thought of losing El.

"Kali *please* – " El sobbed, her eyes red and sore but the tears still came. Years of suppressed emotions seeping through her body.

Funshine cleared his throat and stepped forward, "Kali, maybe we should – "

"No!" Kali called through gritted teeth turning her attention onto the gang for the first time since they had found Mike and El. "In fact, get out." She told her friends who all looked at each other in mild surprise but were quick to obey her orders. They piled out of the room and headed for the living space downstairs.

Kali turned to face Mike and El who were holding hands, both stood so close that their arms brushed together. Her gaze turned cold and she breathed heavily through her nose. "Did you not hear me *boy*?!" she shouted looking directly at Mike again. "Get out *now*!"

Mike clenched his jaw and glared back at Kali, "I'm not going *anywhere* unless El comes with me."

Kali laughed harshly, "Eleven is not going anywhere with you!"

"Don't do this Kali," El sniffled, her tears gliding over her jaw and

dropping loudly onto her dress. She looked pleadingly at her sister. Her sister who had been there since she was a little girl. Her sister who had helped her to escape the lab. Her sister who was *wrong*. Wrong about El and what decision she would make if she was pushed.

Kali sneered at Mike and narrowed her eyes, dipping her head. "You asked for it boy," she muttered darkly.

Mike immediately let go of El's hand, his eyes wide and more terrified than she had *ever* seen them. "EL!" an agonised scream ripped from his chest as he fell to his knees, his hands reaching for something that wasn't there. Choking on his tears as he repeatedly cried and screamed at something no one else could see.

El knew immediately what was happening but she felt her boyfriend's raw pain like the vision was real, and it ripped her heart into a thousand pieces. She dropped down next to him, reaching for him desperately but he couldn't hear or feel her. "It's okay, it's not real Mike!" she cried to him, her eyes sparkling devastating tears as he continued to sob.

El was shaking, her love for Mike overtaking every single thought as she held onto his upper arms and lifted her head to glare at her sister. "Get. Out. Of. His. Head," she warned in a deadly hiss before screaming "GET OUT OF HIS HEAD!"

Kali didn't relent, her eyes only growing darker with anger as she stared intensely at Mike who was sobbing and shaking his head in disbelief and utter horror while El tried to wake him out of his slumber with soft words.

But it wasn't working, only *one* thing would help Mike.

El gritted her teeth and without a second thought she stood up and screamed unleashing her powers on her own sister. Kali was immediately flown through the air, clashing into the dresser which tumbled over, the wood splintering with the impact.

Mike was instantly released from his torture and he gasped through his tears, his eyes wild and confused as he stared at El, unable to

believe she was real. "It's okay," she sobbed wrapping her arms around him, letting him collapse into her body as he cried, and she rocked him. "I'm here, it wasn't r-real Mike. I'm here I promise."

"I thought," Mike wept, panting from his tears as he lifted his head to look at El's face as if desperate to tell himself that she was telling the truth and was unharmed. "I t-thought you were d-dead!" he gasped, his breath so wracked with grief it was painful for the both of them.

"I'm alive," El repeated, a loving and yet sad smile under the reams of tears. "I'm alive," she whispered as she kissed his lips softly. Mike kissed her back with his trembling lips, both of them being revived from the touch.

"What the hell happened in here?!" Funshine asked as he burst into the room with Mick right behind him. Their eyes went from El and Mike in a tight hug, to Kali who was slowly waking up from being knocked unconscious. Her vision was bleary as Funshine and Mick hurried over to her.

Kali sat up rubbing her head in the same moment that El got unsteadily to her feet, carefully bringing Mike up with her who was still shaking violently. She wrapped her arm around his waist, trying to be his crutch as they walked towards the bedroom door.

"Where are you going Eleven?" Kali asked slightly slurred whilst she watched from the ground as her sister and the boy she despised moved further away from her. Panic seemed to heighten in her when El didn't respond.

"Eleven?" Kali repeated, anger rising in her at being ignored as the couple moved through the door way. "ELEVEN!" She screamed in fury.

The couple stopped, and her sister slowly turned to face Kali, her hazel eyes angry, hurt but sure. She lifted her chin proudly and the two young women locked eyes.

"My name is not Eleven. My name is *EL*."

And with that El flicked her chin and the bedroom door slammed

shut, Kali on one side and Mike and El on the other. She heaved a steady breath and then looked up at her boyfriend, giving him a watery smile as she clutched more tightly onto his waist and lead him out of the warehouse.

Neither Mike or El spoke as they walked slowly away from the docks, both of them aimlessly heading towards the dormitory building without actually vocalising it.

El had no idea what time it was, but the sky was black, lit only with a soft blue hue from the light pollution of Chicago. It had gone colder, the temperature dropping drastically and making both Mike and El shudder as they continued to walk, their arms constantly around each other.

El could feel how shell-shocked Mike was, his breathing still shaky as he shuffled his feet in exhaustion of the trauma he had just witnessed. The emotional scar of what he must have seen boiled El's blood with anger and she clenched her jaw knowing that she would protect Mike from *anyone*, including her own sister.

Her mind was spinning making her feel overwhelmed and dizzy. She didn't want to have to think about the events of the evening, wanting desperately to just get to the dorm room with Mike where she could console him. But her thoughts were cruel as they reminded her of eyes watching her in the darkness, of Kali's anger and pure hatred, of Mike's trauma and El's split second decision to use the wrath of her powers on her sister.

El exhaled sharply, trying to stop herself from vomiting as the stress of what was to come and how she was meant to destroy Brenner on her own mixed with the terrible memories that were eating away at her.

Mike clutched onto her own waist more firmly and she knew he could feel her inner trauma. She tried to give him a small smile, but it was forced and they both knew it. "It's going to be okay," she told him breathlessly when he turned his sorrow filled eyes on her. "we're going to go home, a-and you'll feel better."

A tear rolled down Mike's cheek and he nodded numbly, pulling her closer to his side. El was shaking too and trying desperately to control her emotions, determined to be strong for the both of them in this moment.

They were getting closer to the dorm when that familiar shiver rolled down her spine and El's insides clenched with doom. *Not again.*

She spun around, her hand outstretched, no longer caring that she could be exposed. After all, what else could happen today to make it worse? Mike moved with her, his breathing harsh as he looked around too.

The man appeared again and El's heart went into her throat as she stared at him. He made no move to run at her, in fact he looked *relieved* and gave her a weak smile.

Before El could torture the man into locating Brenner, Mike stepped forward staring at him with his mouth gaped open in surprise.

The man looked back at Mike and pulled a cigarette out of his jacket pocket, lighting it and blowing a puff of smoke out as he walked closer to the couple, his eyes still on Mike as he smiled. "Been a *long* time kid..."

Mike gasped, shaking his head in disbelief. "*Chief Hopper?!*"

AN: Congrats to User 'Mileven' for correctly guessing it was Hopper following them all along! :-D

Thank you for reading!

13. Questions and Answers

Part of Your World

AN: I am SO sorry it has taken me so long to get this chapter out. It's been a combination of my mother getting married, who knew she would be such a bridezilla?! And severe writers block!

Thank you for being so patient and I promise there won't be as much of a wait for the next chapter.

But for now, enjoy!

Chapter 13 – Questions and Answers

The man looked back at Mike and pulled a cigarette out of his jacket pocket, lighting it and blowing a puff of smoke out as he walked closer to the couple, his eyes still on Mike as he smiled. "Been a long time kid..."

Mike gasped, shaking his head in disbelief. "Chief Hopper?!"

El blinked in utter confusion, her breath stuttered in her chest as she looked between Mike and the man who had been following her for weeks. How could they *possibly* know each other?

"Yeah it's me, in the flesh." Hopper chuckled slightly at Mike's dismay as the two men approached and shook hands, while El continued to stare at them both with her mouth gaping open.

"I...I don't understand," she finally managed to say, voice croaky from her dry throat.

Hopper looked away from Mike and finally focused in on El, his amused smile faded as he sighed heavily. "I've been wanting to talk to you for a while, I just..." he ran a hand over his beard awkwardly. "I could see you were freaked out thinking I was some kind of stalker. But when I saw *Michael Wheeler* with you of all people, I knew it was about time that we talked."

"And why should we talk?" El questioned, her guard still up. Usually

she didn't do very well with strangers, Mike had been the exception. Seeing how uncomfortable and on edge she was, her boyfriend walked back to her side, their hands firmly locking together. El looked at the man and frowned, "I don't even *know* you."

Hopper exhaled a deep breath, his face serious as he stared back at her. "But I know *you*."

Mike's brow creased in confusion while El almost laughed at even the prospect of the man's words. "You're lying." She said calmly, her chin lifting in defiance. "Come on Mike," El added in a low voice as she tugged on her boyfriend's hand and started to lead him away.

Before Mike could interject, Hopper spoke up, his words making the couple halt. "I know you spent eighteen years captive in that god forsaken lab. I know your *real* name is Jane Ives, *not* Eleven."

El froze for a moment, the late night sounds of Chicago dimming away while the pounding of her heartbeat in her ears became prominent. She slowly turned around, Mike following her lead as she looked back up at the mysterious man who was taking another drag of his cigarette.

"How could you *possibly* know that?" she asked him breathlessly, her eyes wide and startled as she stared at the man, looking for any sign of a lie or weakness. There was a strong probability that he was lying to her, making up a name to lure her in.

He sighed looked tired, his blue eyes staring into her own. El was surprised to see how caring those eyes were, while his broad shoulders, height and build might look intimidating, his blue eyes were soft but strong.

He looked around the area before taking a cautious step closer to Mike and El. "Look, we can't talk about this out here," he whispered urgently, his eyes concerned. "Is there somewhere we can get off these streets and talk?"

"We could go to my dorm – "

"No," El said immediately shaking her head at Mike, interrupting him.

She still didn't know if she could trust this man and she hated the idea of him knowing where Mike lived, especially if he was dangerous.

"El," Mike whispered, stepping closer to her so they could speak quietly. His warm breath fanned her cheek as he whispered. "He isn't dangerous, he's the chief of police from Hawkins. Him and Joyce were even *friends*. He's safe, okay?"

El stared at Mike taking in the assurance in his beautiful starry eyes before she hesitantly turned back to the man in front of them. "You are friends with Joyce?" she asked cautiously.

Surprisingly the man seemed to blush under the streetlights and he coughed awkwardly, "well um, we haven't seen each other in years... but yeah. I'd definitely call her a friend."

El nodded, her jaw clenched as she weighed the options. Mike seemed to trust this man and if what he was saying was true, he was still friends with Joyce. She turned to her boyfriend a question in her eyes, "do you think Will and Joyce would mind if we went to their house?" she murmured quietly.

Mike looked down at his watch seeing it was almost midnight before he smiled softly at El and nodded. "I'm sure they won't mind. But just let me call ahead okay?"

"Okay," El breathed out in relief, squeezing Mike's hand as he turned to look at the man he had called Chief Hopper.

"We'll talk at Joyce's house," Mike said to Hopper who only blushed further but nodded his head, exhaling a shaky breath of smoke. El frowned wondering why he appeared so nervous. Was it because he was lying about knowing Joyce? She clenched her free hand ready to use her powers if needed, the only thing holding her back was that soon they would know the truth about this mysterious man.

The walk to the Byers house was done in silence, an awkward tension between El, Mike and Hopper as they made their way to Dorchester Avenue.

Mike looked between his girlfriend and the Hawkins Chief of Police in total confusion. He couldn't understand what Hopper had been doing following El, and how he could possibly know details about her life that even she was unaware of.

As they walked quietly Mike thought back to the telephone conversation he had just had with Will from a local pay phone. His best friend had still been awake playing video games with Dustin when Mike called to explain that Hopper had been following them and wanted to talk.

"As in the Chief who helped me escape to Chicago?!" Will had asked in astonishment. When Mike had confirmed this was correct, his best friend advised that he would wake up his mom, Nancy and Jonathan and they would wait for them to arrive.

"We're here," Mike coughed awkwardly, glancing between El who had her jaw set tight and Hopper who was looking on edge before he hesitantly knocked at the front door.

It only seemed like seconds before Joyce was throwing open the door, looking concerned, her eyes falling briefly on Mike and El before they lingered on the Chief. He stared back at her, swallowing slowly. Joyce heaved a deep breath and her gaze filled with relief.

"Come in you three," she ushered to the group, Mike and El passing quickly through the doorway while Hopper stood still for a moment staring at Joyce.

"It's, um...it's good to see you," he offered weakly, rubbing at the back of his neck.

Joyce crossed her arms and frowned, "it's good to see you too Hop. I was worried about you." She sighed sadly and looked down at the worn porch steps. "I wish you hadn't stayed away so long."

"I know," Hopper replied solemnly, his shoulders low with guilt. "I know you were scared and worried about Will, I just...those *people* Joyce, I..."

Whatever Hopper was trying to get out Joyce seemed to understand,

stepping out onto the porch in her dressing gown and gently pressing her hand on the Chief's arm. "I know," she told him softly, giving him a small but understanding smile. "Come inside Hop, it's freezing."

The living room was dimly lit by the glow of two floor lamps as the occupants of the room all held warm drinks handed around by Joyce, their attention focusing between the Chief who sat in an arm chair nearest the fireplace and the powerful young girl who sat across the room, on the edge of the sofa, her hand locked with Mike's on her lap.

Will was sat on Mike's other side, while Jonathan, Dustin and Nancy stood up, anxiously wondering what events had taken place that night to lead them all to this situation.

Joyce placed the now empty tray on the coffee table and perched herself on the arm of the sofa next to Will. "Is someone going to tell me what's going on?" she asked calmly, her motherly concern taking over as she focused her attention mainly on El.

"He has been following me," El replied bluntly, her eyes narrowing slightly as she appraised Hopper.

Joyce startled and turned her attention onto the man in question, all eyes were now on him and he sighed gruffly. "She's telling the truth. I *have* been following her. Well, her *and* Kali Prasad."

"And why would you do that?" Mike interjected, his brow etching with worry but mainly from his determination to protect El. He squeezed her hand gently but kept his focus on the Chief.

Hopper chuckled in a low voice, "believe it or not kid, I was trying to protect her. Her and Kali."

"Why?" El asked quickly, her voice still low and without emotion.

The group watched as the gruff Chief's eyes softened, a sadness in his stare that El couldn't distinguish. Only Joyce exhaled quietly, a wretched frown on her brow as she remembered the demons of Hopper's past and where they had stemmed from.

"Because that lab killed my daughter, and I can't allow it to hurt

anymore children," the Chief said resolutely, his words shocking the group, El more than anyone. She didn't say anything, her heart in her throat and her eyes imploring the man to continue.

Hopper looked at El and exhaled a shuddering breath, his blue eyes becoming glazed over with water as he flickered his gaze down to his coffee. His thumb ran across the rim of the cup while he spoke quietly.

"My daughter Sara, she was always very gifted. Me and her mom used to tease each other about which side of the family she got it from...but turns out this *special ability* was all her." Hopper chuckled sadly, his chest wracked with grief as he took a sip of his steaming coffee and continued.

"She used to be able to see things. Things that me and her mom couldn't see, things that *no one* else could see. At first, we thought she was going through an imaginary friend phase because she would talk to thin air, but she would always deny it." The ghost of a small smile lifted Hopper's lips for a second before it disappeared as he rubbed at his tired face.

"We took her to a few professionals, especially after some of the things she said she saw weren't nice things. No one could help, so in the end we opted to look elsewhere, alternative therapies I guess..."

The room was silent, everyone's full attention on the Chief whose face had darkened with anger. "That's how we met *Dr* Martin Brenner," he said with a deep scowl, even hearing his name made a chill run down El's spine. Mike looked at her, his eyes soft with understanding as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and clutched her hand.

"He did all these different kinds of tests on her; on her brain activity, on her mannerisms and behaviour. I should have known the moment he discovered she had a special gift that he would exploit it." Hopper said bitterly, his fist clenching dangerously around the handle of the coffee mug.

"She...she got sick. A brain tumour. That bastard said it must have always been there growing, but that's *bullshit*. I know different. I

know that he pushed her to the limit, every time I tried to go in that damn room he said it wasn't safe. I wish I could have withdrawn her earlier from his clutches."

Hopper lowered his head and the room became tense as the sound of sniffing and husky breathing could be heard. El felt horrified, her eyes wide and her mouth slightly open as she took in everything the Chief was saying. Joyce couldn't bare his pain anymore and stood up, quickly hurrying over so that she was sat on the arm of the chair and rubbed at his back supportively.

Hopper tensed for a moment at her touch, lifting his head ever so slightly to look at her through teary eyes. She smiled at him encouraging, giving him the will to go on with retelling the darkest tale of his life. He breathed in and out deeply, his body shaking slightly but determined.

"When they said she had cancer, me and her mom insisted that she was moved to a proper hospital. At this point we were in the worst turmoil you could imagine, barely able to think properly. Brenner and his associates *insisted* that Sara was in the right place, that she could have the full attention of the staff and that if she had any more episodes with her gift, they would know how to manage it better than a regular hospital who would just think she was crazy."

A sob broke from Hopper's chest, startling the room to see such a strong and powerful man crack into a million pieces. It stunned El, her heart going out to the man that only a few hours ago she believed to be evil. Now she could just see he was a grieving father, a man who had loved his child the way any child deserves.

"We trusted the bastard, trusted him until the end when Sara passed away. He made it so difficult for us to have her body released from that *place*, talking about the scientific research he could do if we donated her brain, like that was the *only* thing that mattered to him."

"After everything we went through I became obsessed with that lab, spending endless nights researching, reading stories about abducted children who had special abilities just like Sara. It all started to make sense."

Hopper glanced over at Will and sighed, "and then Joyce rang me in a terrible panic, explaining some men had attempted to kidnap her son. Her son who I already *knew* held gifts. I knew it was those bastards, and I vowed that same day never to let them take another child."

El watched Hopper closer, a frown on her face as she thought back to how he said he knew her real name, a name she had never pondered on before. She had always been Eleven, up until the moment Mike changed her whole world, made her realise what living truly meant.

"Is that how you knew my real name?" El asked the Chief quietly as the whole room looked between her and Hopper. The silence in the room was filled with baited breaths and bewilderment at El's statement, it seemed no one else had realised that her real background was a lot different to being brought up in a lab. It was a life that El knew nothing about, but a life she suspected Hopper might know at least some more details of.

"Yeah," he replied with a solemn nod of his head, his eyes serious with a hint of something else...was it pity? "As I said earlier, your real name is Jane Ives. You are the daughter of Terry Ives and you were taken from her at birth. She was told you were still born but your mother didn't believe that..."

El's heart felt as if it had burst open at this revelation. She had a mother, a *real* mother. "Where...where is she?" El croaked out, her throat constricted with shock as her gaze flickered over Hopper's face, noting the sorrowful expression that etched through his features.

He cleared his throat and heaved a heavy sigh, "she is in a catatonic state kid."

El heard Mike's breath catch in his throat and he squeezed her hand in support while similar sounds of shock could be heard throughout the room. For El however, she was not familiar with this term, but from the reactions of those around her she could only fear the worst. Her hand shook in Mike's hold and she hesitantly looked back at Hopper, "what do you mean?"

He ran a hand over his gruff face before answering her. "Your Aunt Becky thought it was the drugs from the experiments your mom was doing at the lab that had messed her up, but that's not true." Hopper began to explain while El blinked in surprise that she had an Aunt too. She wondered how many more relatives she might have.

"As I said, I've done *a lot* of research into the lab, I now have an accomplice in there who confirmed to me that your mom was given electro shock therapy to shut her up. She knew too much and so...so they..." Hopper closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "They have put her in such a state that she is barely living kid. She would not know you or anyone else, she just...exists..."

El would not have realised she was crying if it was wasn't for the gentle tapping sound caused by her tears sliding off her jaw and landing onto her lap. For a moment there was complete silence in the room, El's eyes set frozen on Hopper as she tried to process what he had just told her. She could not imagine being a prisoner in your own body, and to think her own mother who would not stay quiet about her abduction had received this horrific treatment was enough for her heart to shatter into a million pieces.

"It's my f-fault," El gasped, her whole body shaking with grief for the mother she would never truly know.

Before Hopper could even open his mouth, Mike had engulfed El into his arms and she clutched to him, her face buried against his shirt as he gently rocked her. Joyce hurried over and leaned over El, stroking her hair comforting while she cried.

"It is *not* your fault," Mike said fiercely, his jaw set and his eyes furious. "It's those *bastards* who have done this. To you, to your mom, even to Kali."

El continued to sob, her tears soaking Mike's shirt. "They r-ruined her M-Mike, because of m-me!"

"This isn't your fault sweetie," Joyce said in a soothing voice, her own tears running down her slightly red cheeks. "Your mom did what any good mother would do, she wanted to protect you and would have died trying. That is what any parent should do for their child. She

loves you sweetie."

El slowly lifted her head from Mike's chest but didn't dare leave his tight and protective embrace. She looked at Joyce through slightly red and watery eyes, seeking assurance and warmth from her. "I love her too. I don't...I don't know how I can when I've never seen her, but I do."

Joyce smiled sadly, reaching forward to stroke El's wet cheek and push a few strands of curly hair behind her ear. "You were with her for 9 months sweetie, she is your mama. She birthed you. You will *always* have a bond, and you will always love her."

El nodded slowly, sniffing as she lay her head back against Mike's chest, one of his hands pressed against the back of her neck to bring her even closer to him. She could tell that he didn't want any distance either, he needed to know she was there just as much as she needed his comfort.

Mike looked up at Hopper who had been watching the three of them through sad eyes. "I still don't understand. Why were you following El? And Kali?"

The Chief blinked and glanced away from El to look at Mike instead. "My accomplice, he's a good guy but he works at the lab. His name is Dr Sam Owens, he didn't work in the lab when El and Kali were there, or even when Sara was being treated. He tells me what Brenner is up to and he told me that they have been working on getting the girls back."

Mike choked on his breath in surprise, El feeling him tense against her while Joyce flinched in terror and Jonathan, Will, Nancy and Dustin exchanged nervous glances. El tried to remain calm, knowing that this day would eventually come. "Is he close to finding us?" she said more bluntly than she meant to.

Hopper focused back on her, his blue eyes serious. "He wasn't up until this morning. They know you're both in Chicago. Sam rang me the second he could get away to warn me that they were going to dispatch a team to the city. They are looking for you both, I had to tell you. I had to help."

El frowned in confusion but most of all frustration. She was sick of this life, sick of running and trying to juggle her different worlds just to survive. It had only gotten Mike, Kali and even herself hurt in the end. "And how can you help?" she asked defeated.

Hopper looked startled by her question as if it was the last thing he thought she would say. He laughed, a genuine amused bark left his body as he looked at her. "Well I'm going to help you take those sons of bitches down of course. No one else needs to get hurt. Once that lab is destroyed we can all be free. We can actually move on."

"It's not that easy," El mumbled shaking her head for good measure as the weeks and weeks of being in the void and trying to clear her mental block just to *see* Brenner hit her like a ton of bricks. Did Hopper just expect her to walk straight back into her prison and kill the man she had once thought of as papa?

As if sensing her line of thought the Chief immediately shook his head and gave her a determined stare, "I am not asking you to kill that bastard, in fact I would like the honour myself. But I am asking for your help, yours and Kali. Your powers *would* make it easier for us to get in the building."

El's chest constricted and she felt Mike tense again. She sighed as she looked at Hopper, "you want Kali's help too?"

"Of course," he answered immediately, a look of bewilderment on his face. "I would have thought you girls would want to bring down the lab. From what I've learnt, it seems like you've been getting your revenge for the last three years."

El shuffled in her seat, sitting up straight from Mike's chest and making him straighten up too. She bit her lip nervously hoping Joyce and Nancy in particular wouldn't read too much into what she had been doing over the three years. She hated the idea of them knowing she was a killer.

"It's not *that*..." El explained, clearing her throat and looking down at her lap where her hands were covered by Mike's. "It's just...me and Kali had a...we..." She closed her eyes, not allowing the tears to fall this time before looking back up at Hopper resolutely. "I'm not with

Kali anymore. She did some terrible things tonight and I cannot forgive her for it, no matter what her reasoning was."

"What did she do?" Dustin asked from where he stood next to the sofa, his eyes filled with curiosity and awe as he looked between Mike and El.

When El couldn't answer, Mike sighed heavily and looked up at his best friend. "She found out about me and El and um, well she didn't take it very well. She used her powers on me..."

"Excuse me?" Nancy asked looking scandalised as her hands went to her hips. "She used her *powers* on you?!"

El slowly looked up at her boyfriend, her face guilt ridden as she watched the colour drain from Mike's cheeks as he clearly replayed the horror he had seen. "Look, it doesn't matter now." He said through a tense jaw as he glanced nervously at Nancy who didn't look like she wanted to drop the subject.

Hopper cleared his throat so that the group reluctantly turned their attention back onto him. "Look, I know what she did was wrong, but you've got to let her know what's going on. I'm sure she would want to help. But at the very least she deserves to know that Brenner is sending agents to Chicago." He kept his blue eyes on El, wavering through her inner conflict.

She slowly nodded her head and heaved a sigh, her head dipping low. "You're right," she mumbled quietly. "Kali deserves to know." El made a move to stand up, but Mike gripped onto her hand and she met his confused gaze.

"You're not going now, are you?" he asked in concern, his amber eyes filling with the fear of her leaving.

Truthfully that was exactly what El was planning but as she stared at her boyfriend, realising everything he had been through tonight, she knew she couldn't give him something else to worry about. She shook her head, "no. I'm staying here with you," El said softly before blinking and turning to Joyce. "If that's okay?"

"Of course sweetie," Joyce replied immediately, nodding her head. "This is your home now too honey, you can stay here anytime you want."

El was emotionally drained and overwhelmed by everything that had happened in the last 24 hours. Joyce's motherly love was enough to make her gasp, feeling breathless and choked as she whispered, "thank you."

Mike's mind was reeling as he stared up at the ceiling, his eyes adjusting to the darkness of the living room. Anytime he tried to fully process on everything that had happened, it caused a dull ache to thump against his skull. He shook his head and turned on his side, finding El already facing him, her gaze locking with his.

He smiled softly at her, his eyes flickering over her features. "Are you okay?" he whispered not wanting to wake the others.

It seemed everyone was in the house. After the revelations of the night, Dustin had called Lucas and Max, telling them to come over and filling them in on everything that had happened. Max was beside herself and immediately crushed a very exhausted El into a hug until Joyce insisted they all go to sleep.

The party were all using sleeping bags again, very reminiscent of the last sleepover they had at the Byers' house. Nancy and Jonathan were using Will's room, Joyce was in her own room and Hopper had left a couple of hours ago to collect his car and contact his work partner who had apparently been keeping an eye on Kali for her safety.

El sighed quietly, her eyes roaming over Mike's gaze and his features which were highlighted by the moon. "Are you okay?" she asked instead of answering his question, clearly seeing the shadows that he thought he had hidden within the depths of his amber eyes.

Mike gave El a sheepish smile, trying to see light of the situation even though his mind was providing him with terror ridden flashbacks of seeing El, the woman he loved more than anything in the whole world dead in front of him. He couldn't save her, only cradle her lifeless body in his arms. His jaw clenched as he realised how cruel

Kali had been, showing him his worst nightmare.

He couldn't answer her question either, not directly at least. Mike shuffled in his sleeping bag so that he was even closer to El. The material of the duvets now touching as they faced each other, their breath mingling and fanning their faces gently with warmth. It was reassuring having El close, but it still wasn't close enough.

Mike extracted one of his hands out of the sleeping bag and reached forward, cupping El's cold face and stroking along her cheek bone with his thumb. Their eyes stayed connected as Mike gulped anxiously, his heart picking up pace. "I thought I'd lost you," he whispered as the vulnerability in his heart was let loose. "I thought you were gone forever." He swallowed down the lump in his throat as his eyes began to water.

El shushed him gently, her own hand moving into his black mop of hair and soothing the strands away from his face. "I won't let her hurt you again," she said softly but with a strong determination behind her words. "I won't let *anyone* hurt you Mike, I love you..."

Mike sniffled, foolishly wiping at his tears, "I love you too." He tried moving closer, only succeeding in fumbling with his sleeping bag in frustration. El poised her lips for a moment before her gaze moved to both of the bags which immediately unzipped.

Before Mike could ask what she was doing, El shuffled the rest of the distance and tucked herself into his sleeping bag. His breath caught in his throat at the immediate intimacy they were sharing. The sleeping bags were only made for one person, so their bodies were pressed against each other, from the tips of their toes to their noses which brushed together.

Mike wrapped his arm around El, his palm bleeding heat through the pyjama set she had borrowed off Joyce. His touch settled on her hip while her arm draped around his shoulder, her fingers playing with the shorter black curls at the back of his neck.

Their noses nuzzled slowly against one another, the touch comforting and almost playful. Mike could feel every breath El exhaled, each one making him dizzy with heat as he realised how close her lips were to

his. So close and yet so far at the same time.

"Do you have to go to Kali tomorrow?" Mike whispered, his eyes desperate and concerned as he stared into the magnificent orbs of hazel.

El frowned and sighed heavily, "yes."

"Can I go with you?" Mike asked immediately, his heart hammering away in his chest at the thought of them being separated. "It's not safe, especially now."

El smiled sadly, "and that's exactly why you can't come with me. I can protect myself with my powers, but I can risk losing you."

"But I can't lose you either," Mike gasped, his tears fighting to be released once more. "After everything I saw tonight...I never want you to leave my sight ever again."

El didn't say anything for a moment, just carefully ran her fingers through his hair as her gaze flickered between the dark locks, the constellation of freckles on his nose and cheekbones and then onto his lips. "Let's just forget about all of that for now," she whispered, leaning her head closer so that her lips practically touched his own, making him intake a sharp breath. "I just want to feel you."

Mike barely exhaled before his lips crashed onto El's, his eyes closing tight as he breathed her in and opened his mouth against hers. His grip on her hip tightened as El's tongue swept into his mouth, seeking his own as they stroked in a desperate passion.

He loved her, he needed her, he wanted her by his side always. To feel her, to be there for her and to love her the way she deserved.

El's fingers gripped at Mike's hair and he couldn't stop from groaning into her mouth as desire stirred in his blood. They were both panting, sharing breaths as their tongues moved more furiously together fighting for dominance. Their whole body felt alive with delicious sensations, causing shivers down their spines and heat to pool deep in their cores.

Mike's hand slid down from El's hip, his palm flat against her thigh as

he relished the feel of her form, even if it was through clothing. His fingers moved down further, never breaking their intense kiss as he hooked his hand behind El's knee and hiked her leg up until it curled around his hip bone.

Mike moved even closer then, bringing their hips together as he pulled away from the kiss, his eyes dazed and heavily lidded as he stared at El's blown pupils. "Is this okay?" he asked her breathlessly.

"Yes," El immediately replied before bringing his lips back to her own, her teeth pulling and tugging at his lower lip while he moaned and let his hand move to her ass, a moan of desire and sexual frustration escaping his chest as he tugged her closer and rubbed against her.

El gasped in surprise, breaking the kiss to look at Mike's eyes. He was immediately worried he had taken things too far, and hesitantly moved his hand away from her ass and tried to push his hips away from hers.

"No," El panted shaking her head as she grabbed his hand and put it back on the curve of her body. She pulled him closer, her lips now tickling his ear and making him shiver as her hot breath hit the sensitive skin. She tentatively rolled her hips forward and made them both moan. "I like it," she whispered making Mike lose all brain capacity as all his blood raced down to his crotch.

Their lips connected again in a fiery embrace, every touch feeling sensitive and overwhelming as they slowly grinded against each other, both of them surprised by how amazing it felt.

El's hand left Mike's hair and she quickly found the hem of his t-shirt, her fingers slipping under the cotton material and brushing against his abdomen. Mike took in a sharp breath which El chased with her mouth, their tongues caressing as she gently stroked his bare skin.

"I love you," Mike panted between heavy kisses. "So much."

El smiled against his mouth, her lips making him delirious as their bodies moved together, trying to ease the need for friction and pressure. "I love you too," she said breathlessly as Mike moved his

lips onto her neck, licking and kiss her skin with a hunger he had never known. Wanting her, wanting every part of her.

His hand moved from her ass and his fingers brushed against the buttons of the pyjama top. "Can I?" he whispered against her neck, his mouth hot as he gently sucked on her skin, making her tilt her head back and whimper with need.

"Y-Yes," she practically begged back, needing him closer, as if her life depended on it. In that moment nothing else mattered, nothing but feeling Mike against her. Feeling the tremble of his fingers as he started to unbutton her pyjama top, hearing their stuttered and heavy breaths filled with need and passion, and experiencing the overwhelming sensation of his mouth and tongue on her neck, teasing her with soft nibbles. She had never felt so powerful, so desired, so wanted. This was perfect, a moment that –

A loud snore emitted from Dustin and Mike and El jumped away from each other, which wasn't entirely easy in a joint sleeping bag. Their eyes were wild, still filled with lust and desire but embarrassment had begun to creep into their cheeks as they swiftly squinted through the darkness, finally remembering that they weren't alone.

It seemed like everyone was still asleep and Mike heaved a sigh of relief while trying to catch his breath. He looked up at El, both of them staring at one another for a while before they both nervously laughed, trying to keep their voices quiet.

"So...um, we might have got a bit carried away there," Mike said sheepishly as he rubbed at the back of his neck.

El grinned biting into her lower swollen lip as she nodded in agreement. Her skin still felt incredibly sensitive and she realised that her pyjama top was gaping open, so that at least the curve of her breasts could be seen.

She watched almost playfully as Mike's gaze fell down to her chest, his eyes widening before he realised where he was staring and quickly looked away embarrassed. El tried not to laugh when she saw his eyes flicker back to her chest a second later.

"It's a shame we had to stop," El whispered, smirking slightly to herself as Mike nodded, looking down still at her chest. He made her feel so desired, so beautiful. It was something she had never experienced before, and she liked the confidence that it gave her.

Without pausing to think of what she was doing, El moved her fingers down to the buttons of her pyjama top and slowly undid three more, all the while watching Mike's reaction. His eyes were wide in shock and he gulped loudly, his lips slightly parting in awe.

In a moment of bravery, she took his hand in her own and pulled it closer, until his palm rested on one of her breasts. She could hear the breath catch in Mike's throat and for a moment he just stayed frozen with his warm hand enveloping her soft curves. El didn't realise how nice it would feel and bit her lip, feeling desire seep across her body once more.

Mike's thumb slowly brushed against her nipple and she sighed almost in relief at the tingling sensation that seemed to shoot down her abdomen at the feel of his thumb and fingers teasing her skin. He shuffled closer, his eyes flickering quickly between her chest and her eyes. "You're so beautiful El," Mike whispered as he licked his dry lips.

El's heart was racing as she watched the hunger in his dark eyes, the way he looked at her with such adoration, like he worshipped her. She knew she looked at him the same way, and she wished more than anything they were alone, so she could *truly* demonstrate how much she loved him for his mind, body and soul.

But Dustin's occasional snore bluntly reminded El that they definitely weren't alone. And while she wasn't the most clued up person to social norms, she knew more than enough to know that this kind of stuff should be done in private. Only Mike should hear the passion that she held for him.

He was still marvelling at her body, his fingers gentle and soft, and yet all-consuming and tantalising when El sadly whispered, "I think we should stop."

Mike immediately withdrew his hand, his eyes glazed over with need

but his heart always in control as he nodded his head and exhaled a shaky breath. "Y-Yeah, we probably should."

El raised her hand and stroked her fingers across Mike's sharp cheek bone, marvelling in the beauty of his features for a moment before smiling softly. "But I do want to do that again...at some point." She whispered hopefully.

Mike's eyebrows raised dramatically, his eyes widening so much that El wanted to giggle at how adorable he was. "Sure!" he said eagerly, finding it difficult to be quiet when he was so enthusiastic. El beamed at him, loving every little trait he had that made him the wonderful man that he was.

After Mike had hurried to the bathroom to "calm down", they snuggled back together in the sleeping bag, El wrapped up in his arms, her back against his chest as she sighed contently, never wanting to sleep anywhere but in Mike's embrace.

"Good night," he caressed against her ear, pressing a delicate kiss to the lobe. "I love you."

El smiled to herself, her hands resting on Mike's arms gently squeezing him in response as she closed her eyes, "Good night. I love you too Mike, *always*."

And while her brain was busy trying to process everything that had happened that day, from their Valentine's date, to running from Hopper, Kali finding out about Mike, their fight and all of the revelations about her mama and Hopper's motives; El tried to push it all away.

And while there was a feeling at the back of her mind she couldn't fight off, a niggling feeling of foreboding, El decided to brush it off for now. To succumb to the warmth and safety of Mike's embrace, to allow everything else to leave her mind and body as the only coherent thought that swam through her body was of love.

The battle could wait for one more day.

AN: I hope everyone is strapped in for the angst roller-coaster that's coming up! Also, I am thinking of changing the rating on this story to Mature, so just a bit of prior warning for you.

Thank you so much for reading and please let me know what you thought! :-)

14. Love and Capture

Part of Your World

AN: I am sorry this has taken so long to get to you all! I have had a lot of pretty stressful stuff going on in my personal life, but I'm feeling much better now and ready to get back to this story :-)

With that in mind, let the drama begin!

Chapter 14: Love and Capture

Saturday February 15th 1992

"EL!" an agonised scream ripped from his chest as he fell to his knees, his hands reaching for her limp body.

He was choking on his tears as he repeatedly cried and screamed her name, cradling her body, protecting it from harm as he sobbed for the girl he loved.

Mike awoke with a start, beads of sweat clinging to his forehead as he blinked back the tears that had prickled at his amber eyes. His heart was in his throat, beating desperately as he tried to catch his breath.

He took in his surroundings, everything coming back into focus as he realised where he was and who he was cuddled up to. Mike eyes flickered over her curly locks before falling onto her beautiful face. El was just as perfect when she was sleeping. Her face relaxed of all tension and worry, her pretty pink lips slightly parted and her eyes lids twitching ever so slightly from her dream.

Mike instinctively pulled El closer, his arm wrapped around her stomach and brought her further into his chest as he buried his nose in her hair and breathed her in, her scent immediately lulling his panicked heart.

It was just a nightmare, Mike told himself as he willed his mind to forget the images of El cold and limp in front of him. Images that Kali

had planted in his head and he was struggling to forget. It was as if they had been burnt into his mind which was now forever scarred with his worst fear.

Through the closed drapes Mike could see the sun was starting to rise and he squinted through the semi dark room, pulling his arm off El just for a second so he could check the time on his digital watch. 6.07am.

Mike peaked a look around at his friends, all of them fast asleep, their gentle breathing calming the hostile air and reminding Mike that he was safe; with his friends, with his girl, with the party.

His ears twitched slightly as he heard rustling in the kitchen, the sound of porcelain clinking and the low murmur of voices that sounded like Joyce and Hopper. Mike frowned for a moment, his brain tired and confused before everything started to slot into place as he remembered the Chief returning to the house in the early hours of the morning.

The last 24 hours seemed like a dream almost, how could the day go from what had been the perfect Valentine's date; to them running for their lives, only for it to be Hopper. Mike's thoughts filled with Kali's angry eyes, her dark stare that had penetrated the walls of his mind as she read his deepest fears and brought them to life.

Mike's jaw clenched in fury and his arm tightened around El protectively, wanting to keep her safe from *everything*. From the lab, from Kali and from anyone who would hurt her or do her harm. He loved her with every fibre of his being, and he would die before he let anything happen to her.

El sighed softly in her sleep and she snuggled further into Mike's hold, a faint smile on her lips as her hands tightened their clutch on his arms. He instantly leaned forward, leaving a soft kiss on her warm cheek before settling back down, closing his eyes and calming himself in the feel of El wrapped up in his embrace, both of their hearts beating perfectly in unison. She was here, she was safe.

"I'm sorry to put this all on you Joyce," Hopper sighed heavily from

where he was sat at the small kitchen table, his large palms cupping the steaming mug of coffee Joyce had just handed to him.

The woman in question pulled out the chair next to him, sitting down and sipping at her own coffee. She poised her lips in thought for a moment and then smiled sadly, "this isn't a normal family. That's what I've always said, and El is a part of my crazy family now."

Hopper looked up at Joyce, getting lost in her chocolate brown eyes for a moment before a small smile curved his lips, "you've really taken to her, haven't you?"

Joyce chuckled quietly, trying to be mindful of her sleeping babies only a room away. She glanced at Hopper catching his blue eyes already staring at her and blushed ever so slightly. It seemed that those first love feelings never truly left her. She cleared her throat and smiled, "you've taken to her too. I can tell."

Hopper shrugged, a tentative smile playing on his lips. "It's hard not to. She's brave, caring, strong minded, sarcastic and kind of intimidating. She reminds me of Sara in a way, or more what I would have *wanted* Sara to be like when she grew up."

"She's quite the girl," Joyce agreed as she took another sip, blowing on the hot liquid for a moment before grinning against the rim. "And Mike's in love with her."

Hopper snorted, rolling his eyes in amusement. "Yeah I could tell Wheeler had the hots for her, and that was before I saw them sharing a sleeping bag."

Joyce grinned and playfully shoved Hopper's shoulder in indignation. Their eyes locked again, blue on brown, sparkling and happy for a moment before the reality of the situation came back to them both. Joyce sighed, "I'm glad you're back Hop. If they were going to be after her, I'm happy we have you on our side. I...I missed you."

A blush crept into Hopper's cheeks which he managed to mostly hide under his stubble, but he had to cough to try and clear his suddenly dry throat. He grabbed the coffee mug and took a large gulp, immediately regretting it when he burnt his tongue.

"I'm sorry I was gone for so long, I uh, I missed you too."

Joyce gave him a shy but understanding smile. "I get it Hop, especially after everything you said last night. I know you were trying to bring down those bastards, I wish I could have helped more."

"No this isn't on you Joyce," Hopper immediately replied, shaking his head sternly. "Even if you had known what I was doing, I still couldn't have let you get involved. Not just for your safety but Will's too. If they found you, they would have found him too."

Joyce sighed heavily, rubbing at her tired brow. "I just want this all to be over Hop, *really* over."

He gave her a small understanding smile and hesitantly placed his palm over the back of her right hand which was lying next to her coffee mug. Their eyes connected at the contact, a whisper of something deep in their hearts swirling closer to the surface.

"It will be over soon Joyce," Hopper said with determination written all over his face. "I promise you, those bastards will pay."

Joyce smiled weakly, her chocolate brown eyes dancing over Hopper's face before she opened her mouth to speak. However, before she could let the words roll off her tongue, the sound of bare feet shuffling across the hall carpet startled her and Hopper, both of them immediately inching their joined hands away from each other.

Will rounded the corner, his hair a ruffled mess and his eyes still filled with sleep. Joyce smiled at him lovingly, "morning sweetie," she whispered as he padded over to the table, taking a seat next to his mother.

"Morning mom," Will yawned rubbing at his eyes for a moment. He blinked and looked over at Hopper, giving him a slight grin. "Morning Hop."

"Morning kid," the Chief replied gruffly giving him a warm smile. "I bet you didn't expect all of this would happen when you woke up yesterday morning."

They could all tell he was trying to make light of the situation to ease the very real tension in the air, and Will appreciated the effort. Especially because he had almost been in a similar position to El, but perhaps his outcome would have been like Sara's.

"You can say that again," Will answered before quietly thanking his mom who handed him a mug of coffee, still steaming from the pot. He thought back to his easy day of playing video games with Dustin as they both tried to ignore the fact it was Valentine's day. It wasn't that Will was opposed to the commercial holiday, but it merely reminded him how hard it was to find the right guy, especially when his mom hardly let him leave her side.

"Are the others awake?" Joyce asked her son as she started to rifle through the fridge, pulling out eggs and bacon.

"Lucas just went to the bathroom and then said he was gonna wake Max up...good luck to him," Will smirked as he thought about his red headed best friend who was extremely grumpy in the mornings. "Dustin, Mike and El are still sleeping though. I'm not sure about Jonathan and Nancy."

"Can you wake up your brother so he can help me with breakfast?" Joyce asked Will as she started to crack a few eggs.

"I'll help," Hopper immediately volunteered as he got up from the table and pulled up the sleeves of his plaid shirt.

Joyce looked at him in surprise and quirked up an eyebrow in amusement. "Since when do you cook Hop?"

Hopper scoffed playfully, "hey I've *always* been a good cook!"

Joyce chuckled, turning away to hide her blushing smile as she started to heat up the frying pan for the bacon. "Yeah right," she teased while Hopper gasped in mock offence.

All the while Will who was still sat at the table blinking in confusion as he watched his mom and the Chief of Police blatantly flirt. It was kind of sick in one sense, because this was his *mom*. But he couldn't deny that it was nice to see her looking so happy, so light and giddy

as she continued to goad the Chief who didn't look nearly as intimidating when he was foolishly smiling like that. Will smirked to himself and quietly left the kitchen, his mind set on waking everyone up for breakfast and giving his mom and Hopper some more time to be all gross together.

El could barely get through her plate of eggs and bacon, her Eggos hardly touched as her stomach twisted with nerves. She knew she would have to leave soon to go back to the warehouse and confront her sister. Kali had a right to know about the lab, especially because they were on their way to Chicago to look for them. But El wasn't so sure she would be able to look into her sister's eyes, especially after what she had done to Mike.

Her feelings over the whole event had soured further overnight and she felt an anger seeping through her body. El knew she was in the wrong for lying to Kali in the first place, but her sister hadn't even given her a chance to explain. After everything they had been through together, she felt like she at least deserved to have been able to tell Kali anything without her anger and disapproval.

El blinked in a daze as she felt Mike's hand squeeze her knee under the table in support. She turned to look at him, he was giving her a soft smile, his eyes lingering on hers with understanding. She wanted to cry because of how perfect he was. He knew she had killed throughout the years to defend herself and to seek justice for what she had been put through, he knew her deepest and darkest secrets and yet he still managed to love her. El knew she would never be able to let Mike go, he was it for her. What all of the Disney princesses sang about and wished to find, he was her happily ever after.

A renewed sense of determination flickered into El's heart like a beacon, lit by the love and reassurance of Mike. It wasn't going to be easy to talk to Kali, but once it was done, El would be able to move on. She could take on the lab with Hopper's help and they could finish this once and for all. And then...well El would get to finally start living her life with Mike, friends and new family by her side.

"Are you okay?" Mike whispered to El, leaning in slightly to give

them privacy while the rest of the group milled around with their plates of food, noisy and hungry.

El truly looked at Mike in return, watching the concern and love mixing in his astonishing starry eyes, the redness of his perfectly kissable lips and the strength of his aura. She smiled softly as she thought about the things she would be able to do once the lab had been defeated, when Brenner was no longer a threat.

"Yes," El breathed out as her lips curved into a tender smile, her eyes drawing into Mike's. "Yes, I am okay." *Or at least I will be soon.*

Once everyone's stomachs were filled, hunger at bay for now, El wandered up to Will's bedroom with Max who had brought her a few clothing options from her apartment considering all El had was her red dress.

El got changed in silence, opting for a pair of Max's blue jeans and a white t-shirt. She was just tugging the cotton material over her head when she heard her best friend speak in a tone of concern she had never expected from the fiery red head.

"Are you *sure* you don't want me to come with you?" Max was sat on the edge of Will's bed, her blue eyes sparkling with anxiety. "I might not have telekinetic abilities, but I can still kick ass if needed."

El couldn't help but smile despite the gravity of the situation. She continued to pull the cotton shirt down until it covered her torso and looked over at Max. "I know you can kick ass," she said in a reassuring voice, wanting her best friend to understand that she wasn't judging her ability to look after herself. "But this is something I have to do alone. Kali won't listen to you, or Hopper and definitely not Mike. Only I can get through to her."

Max nodded solemnly, wringing her hands nervously together in her lap. El watched her for a moment and then hurried over, sitting down on the mattress next to her and grasping her nervous hands. "Why are you so worried?" El couldn't help but ask, her brow lowering as she watched her best friend closely.

Max sighed, shrugging her shoulders slightly and hesitantly met El's

gaze. "You're the first best friend I've ever had. *Of course* I love the boys, but you're like my soul sister you know?"

El beamed, a happy fluttering in her heart at being able to experience a close friendship like this. Having Mike in her life was one thing, and it was a pretty *big* thing, but also getting to have a friend who she could talk to about her insecurities, her worries over doing the wrong thing with Mike and someone who was also her cheerleader was incredible.

"I understand," El said softly, giving Max a tender smile.

"Just...don't let Kali give you any shit, okay? You're an amazing person El, and we all understand why you kept your relationship with Mike from her, don't feel bad about it. You apologised and it's her turn to grovel."

El exhaled, a heavy sigh leaving her chest as she nodded in agreement with Max. She was right of course. El would go and do the right thing, she would tell Kali about the bad men and how she needed to keep moving unless she wanted to face them, and then it would be up to her sister if she wanted to see the bigger picture and apologise to El and Mike. Although she didn't know if she was ready to forgive her sister, especially because her boyfriend seemed to still be suffering the after effects of having such a trauma forced upon his mind.

"Come on," El said squeezing Max's hand before she stood up from the bed. "The sooner I leave, the quicker I'll be back," she added in what she hoped was an optimistic tone coupled with a wide smile. Deep inside she was anything but optimistic. She was nervous, scared, angry, hurt and on edge.

Mike was trying desperately to stay calm, but his friends could always recognise his nervous pacing. Lucas looked over from where he was helping Will roll up the sleeping bags and he frowned, "Mike. She's gonna be okay."

"You don't know that Lucas," Mike mumbled darkly, his jaw and fists clenched as he continued to pace.

"Mike she's a total super hero! She's a badass." Dustin added as he walked back into the living room, munching on Nilla wafers as he watched Mike come to a pause and roll his eyes.

"Look, I know she can look after herself, but – " Mike was cut off by Will, Lucas and Dustin hurriedly shushing him as El started to descend the stairs with Max. His heart went immediately into his throat and he couldn't help the hopeless smile that curved on his lips as he appraised his girlfriend; a determined stance to her beautiful face and an air of strength about her. She truly was remarkable.

Once Hopper, Joyce, Nancy and Jonathan were back in the living room, El gathered her things and pulled on her shoes. Mike stood next to her, unable to leave her side even for a moment because of the worry coursing through his veins at the thought of parting with her. He knew she would be quick, that she wouldn't want to linger with Kali and the other gang members, but Mike felt like every second was going to feel like hours had gone by. He always wanted her by his side, now that she was in his life it felt like she was an essential part of him, and he couldn't be without her.

"You come straight back here when you're done," Joyce said to El as she squeezed her tight in a maternal hug. "And I'll cook you whatever you like for dinner."

Mike watched as El rested her chin against Joyce's shoulder and closed her eyes for a moment, a warm smile on her pretty pink lips as she relished in the feeling of a mother caring for her.

"Thank you Joyce," El whispered quietly, opening her eyes and catching Mike's gaze before he quickly looked away, wanting her to have this private moment with Joyce.

"Of course sweetie, we all care for you very much, you have a home here anytime you want it," Joyce's words and the way she cupped El's cheek lovingly caused Mike to feel like his throat was closing up with the heavy emotion that hit his heart. He knew how much El wanted to belong and find her home, it brought tears to Mike's eyes to see her being treated the way she deserved.

He vowed in that moment of vulnerability to try and make her as

happy as possible for the rest of his life.

Once everyone had given El a hug or waved her off with words of encouragement, they all seemed to come up with random excuses to leave Mike and El alone, hurrying out of the living room and either taking the stairs or hoarding into the kitchen.

Mike turned to look at El to find her gaze was already on him, her beautiful hazel eyes flickering over his face. They both smiled softly in unison, and before Mike could even blink, they had moved towards one another and suddenly El was in his arms, warm and whole in his embrace.

He wrapped her up securely, bringing her closer to his chest and pressing a lingering kiss to her forehead while she rested her cheek against his racing heart. "I wish I could go with you," Mike finally murmured, his lips pressed against El's temple.

She shook her head gently and sighed heavily, "it's not safe for you to be around Kali right now. I couldn't forgive myself if she hurt you again." El pulled away enough to rest her chin on Mike's chest to look up at him, causing him to crane his neck slightly to meet her gaze.

"I want to believe there is good in her," El whispered self-consciously as if she was worried Mike would laugh at her words. He didn't laugh though, only nodded in understanding. "Being in that lab, being tortured all of those years...it changes you." El added as if she needed to further explain her words. "We wanted revenge, we both did."

"El," Mike said in a quiet and soft voice, a small smile on his lips. "You don't have to explain yourself to me. If you want Kali in your life I understand, and I will support you. I know you have both been through hell and back. Maybe one day things will be better between me and her. We'll figure it out, okay?"

El exhaled in relief and nodded in agreement, "okay," she breathed out as she balanced on her tip toes to kiss Mike's lips. Just as she was about to pull away, Mike's hands moved to her cheeks, keeping her in place as he kissed her back, firmly and longingly. He was scared of their parting and if he could delay it, even with the beauty of a kiss, then he would. He closed his eyes, inhaling El's scent and allowing

his whole being to be taken over by her love and her touch. Her fingers in his hair and her mouth opening against his.

"I love you," El said in a breathless husky voice after several minutes of intense kissing and lingering touches. Their foreheads were pressed together, and their eyelids had slipped shut, both of them just taking in the moment of solace; the overwhelming happiness that sparked through their bodies at being so close.

"I love you too," Mike replied, his eyes still closed as he playfully nuzzled El's nose with his own. A smile crept up onto her lips, a mirroring grin on his own mouth seconds later. He knew she was leaving to see Kali in higher spirits than she had been before, and Mike felt a similar feeling of ease at her parting.

When they finally broke away, El reached for her bag, taking a deep breath and looking up at Mike. "I'll see you soon."

He reached for her one more time, hugging her to his body, their arms wrapping around each other tightly, almost clutching at each other's shirts to stay in the moment forever. "Hurry back," Mike whispered in response.

The walk back to the warehouse seemed to go without trouble. El was extra cautious, making sure she slipped down the more unknown streets, or disappeared within large crowds in case anyone was watching her.

After her moment with Mike, El felt rejuvenated and ready to talk to Kali. She was in a better mindset and prepared to tell her sister every new piece of information on the bad men. She hoped that Kali would join the fight, but most importantly she wished that her sister would see the fatal errors she had made the night before and apologise for what she had done to Mike. In time maybe, there could be forgiveness.

El shivered from the cold and wrapped Mike's jacket further around her slim body. He had insisted she took his jacket of course, not wanting her to be cold in the early spring Chicago weather. Of course Will actually *had* spare jackets in his house, but that hadn't stopped

Mike from protesting she wore his. A small amused smile played on El's lips when she thought about how gallant her boyfriend could be.

The walk to the warehouse usually took around twenty minutes, this time however it was taking longer as El tried to navigate new routes to keep any lingering eyes off of her. She walked with a steady pace, her legs pumping with adrenaline and slight nerves as she tried to replay in her mind exactly what she would say to Kali.

El knew it wasn't going to be an easy talk, for either of them, but it needed to take place. For all the recent animosity between the sisters, there was still love and Kali deserved to know the truly dangerous situation they were in. El couldn't have her, or the gang members become sitting ducks.

The sun was at its highest point by the time El was walking onto the docks, the sun beams that were able to escape the thick grey clouds warmed her face and eased some of the tension that was bleeding into her shoulders.

Nerves were swirling around her gut with every step she took closer to the warehouses, her hazel eyes already set on the final dilapidated building hidden furthest away. El paused for a moment, looking cautiously around her surroundings before continuing with her now short journey to the rusted metal building concealed behind larger warehouses.

El took an audible deep breath, her fists clenching at her side for a moment as if willing herself to move; to walk into that building and get this altercation over with. She squared her shoulders and then pushed open the rickety side door with a determination that was making her heart pick up speed.

The moment the creak of the metal door opening could be heard, El wasn't surprised to hear the shuffling around of the gang members, no doubt reaching for their weapons as she entered the large space.

Axel was the first to speak, lowering his gun and smirking as he watched El hesitantly step closer. "Well look what we have here," he teased in a snide voice, putting his gun into his back pocket. "Our little Shirley has returned."

El ignored Axel's comment, her jaw tightening but otherwise feeling unmoved by his remarks. Dottie had gone back to painting her nails an electric blue and popping her gum and Mick returned to her cigarette, hauling herself up into the window seat and taking a deep drag of the roll up.

"Where is Kali?" El asked Mick, knowing she would get the most sense out of her as she walked over to the window.

Mick blew out a circle of smoke and turned to look at El, a frown on her brow. "She's out looking for you of course. Her and Funshine, she wanted to apologise or something. Felt pretty bad," she said shrugging her shoulders as if it was no big deal.

El's stomach twisted painfully and she took an unsteady breath. "It's not safe out there," she explained, wringing her hands together.

"Didn't stop you Shirley," Axel commented as he started to count a wad of cash.

El sighed heavily and looked sharply at the intimidating man, her eyes narrowing at him. "The bad men are out there, they know we're in Chicago. I *need* to warn Kali."

"Are you serious?" Mick asked, coughing out a mouthful of smoke in surprise before she hesitantly stubbed out the cigarette. "Are they in Chicago too? How much time do we have before they find us?"

El bit her lip and shook her head, "I...I don't know. But there are people who want to help us. A Police Chief and – "

"A *Police Chief*," Axel snorted in amusement, going back to counting his money, only having paused when El had exclaimed that the bad men knew they were all in Chicago. "Oh yeah, I'm sure the Chief *really* wants to help us. He won't care at all that we've *killed*, stolen, have all these firearms. Oh yeah, he'll be our *best* friend," Axel sniggered in a childish voice while anger rose up within El.

"You don't have to believe me," she said fiercely. "I don't care about you Axel. But I *need* Kali to know. It's not safe to be here anymore, and if any one of you take that threat seriously than you should – "

El was never able to get another word out as the room suddenly filled with carnage. Bullets shot through the steel structure, hot and dangerous shards of metal smashing through the air as screams and shouts filled the space.

El's heart was in her throat, her eyes wide with terror, as she was unable to comprehend where she should look first. Mick was on the floor, clutching at her side, a pool of blood surrounded her. Dottie was screaming as she cowered under the table and Axel was laughing sadistically as he shot rounds of ammunition back at the steel walls.

The door caved in, men in heavily armed black outfits swarmed into the space, loaded guns in their hands as they turned their attention to shooting at Axel who tried hiding behind the make shift couch before El watched in horror as he was brought down by bullet after bullet.

She screamed in fury at the devastation before her and started to fling her hands into the air, the men shouting as they hit the walls, the furniture or the ceiling. Anger and the need to survive rushed through El's body as she fought back, killing if needed.

"Jane! Run!" Mick croaked weakly from the floor as El whirled around to look at her, not realising the agents that had crept up behind her until it was too late.

She felt something sharp prick into her neck and she gasped trying to breathe as the room started to spin.

"We've got her!" she heard a man shout triumphantly as her vision started to blur around the edges.

"Where is the other one?" a harsh woman's voice asked, a voice that was eerily familiar to El. "Subject Eight. Where is she?! Check the upper floors."

El was drowning, her head was spinning, she could hardly feel her body crash down onto her knees. Her sight was weakening as she just managed to focus in on Mick who had gone still on the ground lying in her own deep red blood.

"What do we do with the others Miss Frazier?" El heard as an echo as

she completely fell to the ground, her head hitting the cold concrete surface before unconsciousness took her.

"Kill them."

Something wasn't right. Mike could feel it in his chest, the way his lungs seemed to constrict on him, how he couldn't sit still and preferred to pace instead of thinking rationally.

It was late afternoon and El had been gone for three hours. While the party tried to reason with Mike that El and Kali having a serious talk could take some time, he couldn't stop the ache in his heart or the dizziness in his mind.

"Why don't you get some sleep honey?" Joyce had said for the fifth time, reaching forward to pat Mike's shoulder. He was slumped in the armchair, his face in his palms and his eyes squeezed shut as he tried to stop the panic racing through his body.

"And by the time you wake up, she'll probably be back," Joyce said without much assurance. As the hours had ticked by everyone else was starting to feel the angst. First Mike, then Joyce and Max and now Hopper who was stood by the window, moving the curtain aside now and again to peer out with a deep frown etching into his lined brow.

"I should just go there," Mike said more to himself than anyone else as he pushed his hands away from his slightly sweaty face and stood up. "Y-Yeah, I'll just go there to check – "

"Don't be stupid kid," Hopper interrupted, turning away from the curtain and standing to his full height. "It sounds like that Kali would kill you if she got the chance."

"I can look after myself," Mike bit back, starting to feel on edge and frustrated that no one thought he could be brave enough to fight. He knew how everyone saw him, the hopeless nerd who was clumsy and socially awkward as hell. But when it came to El, Mike was different. He wanted to be her hero, he wanted to protect her, he wanted to have courage.

Hopper sighed tiredly and rubbed at his forehead, "look kid I'm sure you can, but this situation is very different okay? For one, they have pow – "

A shrill ringtone suddenly sounded in the tense living room and Hopper hurried to pull the black bulky cell phone out of his inner pocket. He read the number flashing across the screen and Mike didn't miss the way his face paled.

"Owens, what is it?" Hopper asked the moment he answered the call. Mike's eyes widened as he stared at the Chief, Joyce rose from the arm of the chair, anxiety sparking in her eyes and the party, Jonathan and Nancy who were sat around the room nervously exchanged glances.

"Shit," Hopper hissed out in frustration as he pinched his nose and begrudgingly met Mike's wild and expectant stare. He heaved a painful sigh, "they've found them."

"No," Mike gasped out, his heading spinning and his stomach churning. "No, no, no," he repeatedly in a choked voice as he hurried to put on his shoes while everyone stood around in shock, looking between Mike's frantic actions and Hopper who was still on the phone.

Hopper was covering his eyes with his palm and nodding slowly to whatever Owens was telling him. "And do you know which one it is? Okay...okay I'll be back in contact soon. Bye." He ended the call and watched as Mike got ready to flee.

"Mike," he said softly, watching as the boy ignored him and pulled on his hoody, his foot one step out of the door. "*Mike*," Hopper repeated more sternly as he gripped the shaking boy's shoulder.

"Owens doesn't know if it's El yet," he said in a hurried voice trying desperately to stop Mike from running.

He looked up at the Chief, not realising the tears that were running down his pale cheeks "It's not El?" he croaked, desperate to know she was safe. *Desperate* to know that this was all just one big misunderstanding.

"Look," Hopper exhaled in a grave voice. "All Owens knows is that the team have been successful in obtaining one of the subjects. They've called ahead to get the room prepared for her arrival. Owens doesn't know if it's Kali or El at this point okay? But what *I* need to do now is get to that warehouse."

"I'm coming with you," Mike said immediately, standing taller and clenching his fists.

"Not gonna happen," Hopper shook his head resolutely as he reached for his equipment and his gun. "It's not safe."

"I don't care," Mike breathed out, panting from the adrenaline rushing through his veins. He ignored Nancy's pleas for him to listen to the Chief.

"Mike, this is too dangerous. You don't even have a - "

"I DON'T CARE!" Mike screamed, making everyone in the room jump, their faces filled with concern and worry. He was shaking, tears spilling down his cheeks at the thought of El being alone, being captured by those bastards. By *him*, the one who had haunted her dreams, the one she had called Papa.

"She's my girlfriend, I love her. Do you understand? I LOVE her! I'm coming with you." Mike said through a trembling voice, his resolve set and his heart racing, hoping and praying that it wasn't too late.

"I'm coming too," came an unsuspecting voice as Will stood up from the couch, a determination flickering in him that Mike had never seen before. He looked at his best friend in amazement for a moment, and then felt a small smile of gratitude lift his lips for a second.

"No, you are not!" Joyce and Jonathan exclaimed in unison. "I'll go," Joyce added with a motherly fierceness to her face. "It's time those bastards paid." The room was suddenly in chaos of voices shouting that they would come too; Max practically screaming that she would kill them if they hurt El, Will insisting he could heal anyone with his powers.

"ENOUGH!" Hopper shouted in frustration, his hand still gripping

onto Mike's shoulder. "Me and Wheeler are going, that's it, no one else, *okay*? My partner will meet me at the warehouse, so there will be three of us. If I need Police back up, then I'll call for it. But none of you are putting yourself in danger, El wouldn't want that."

The room went quiet for a moment, the worry and tension in the air still rife. Mike couldn't take it any longer, his senses seeping back into him as he realised they were standing here feeling hopeless when El was in real danger. He turned to Hopper, his jaw set and his heart racing, every beat for the woman he loved willing him on.

Hopper nodded, no longer needing to explain how dangerous this would be not just for El but for Mike. "You ready kid?"

He was a 21-year-old nerd, he'd never held a gun in his life, he had never fought back in a fight and he was more used to being brave in a role-playing game than he was in real life.

But this nerd, this boy who was teased for being clumsy and weak, was *in love*. And that's the crazy thing about love, you would do anything for it. And Mike would do *anything* for El.

"Let's go."

AN: You show them all how powerful love is Mike! Got to love that boy :-)) I also love El even though I am putting her through hell! :-((

Thank you so much for reading and please share your thoughts! I will try to get the next chapter out to you as soon as possible.

15. Hand Shakes and Battle Plans

Part of Your World

Chapter 15: Hand Shakes and Battle Plans

"Hurry Hopper," Mike said breathlessly, his eyes wide and practically glazed over as he stared through the windshield of the unmarked car they were travelling in towards the docks.

"Yeah I'm going as fast as I can kid," Hopper mumbled in his gruff voice, his hands tightly clenching the steering wheel as he waded through the traffic, his eyes narrowed in concentration. "I'm just glad Owens told me the location," he added more to himself than Mike who was impatiently curling his hands into fists against his jeans.

He might have been to the warehouse once before, but it was in the late night when the city was bathed in darkness, and the adrenaline of running meant he hadn't taken in his surroundings.

"Chief do you copy?" a male voice came through the scratchy radio that Hopper hurried to pick up, bringing it close to his mouth and pushing down the speaker button.

"Yes, I copy. What is it Harrington? Are you at the warehouse?"

Mike frowned slightly for a moment, the name Harrington making him think of that guy Steve that his sister had dated in high school. There was *no way* it could be the same guy.

"I'm further up the dock, I've sighted Kali and that really tall member of her gang going towards the warehouse. I'm just waiting for your back up."

Mike's heart lurched straight into his throat, he choked on his breath as tears sprang to his eyes. If Hopper's partner had sighted Kali returning to the warehouse, that meant...

"No, no, no," Mike gasped, burying his wet face into his sweaty palms, feeling a wave of sickness wash over him like a wave.

Hopper shot Mike a concerned look before turning his attention back to the road, his heavy boot pushing down further on the accelerator as he clicked the speaker button back on the radio. "Wait for us, we'll be there as soon as possible. Do *not* attempt to go into the warehouse, god knows what mess the lab has left it in."

"Copy that Chief."

Hopper placed the radio back into its holder and glanced hesitantly at Mike who was shaking, his face still hidden in his hands but the sound of his unsteady breathing filling the car.

"Hey," Hopper said as gently as he could as he placed a hand on Mike's shoulder while turning his attention back to the road. "We are going to get her back, and then we are going to destroy that lab once and for all."

Mike stuttered out a breath, his hands falling from his face as he turned to Hopper sharply. "Why are we going to the warehouse if the lab has El? We need to go there, we need to *save* her!"

"We *will* save her kid," Hopper interjected, his eyes filled with worry over the unstable young man beside him. "But we *have* to speak to Kali, we need her help."

"Bullshit," Mike mumbled darkly, his jaw tightening and his fists clenching as he stared out at the darkening sky. "We don't need *her*. This is all her fault!" His fury was evident, his body shaking with pain, grief and anger.

Hopper sighed heavily, shaking his head. "It's neither of the girl's faults Mike. It's the *lab*, they are the enemy."

"Do you know what she did to me?" Mike spat out, his voice wavering. "She made me see El, *dead*. Right in front of me. I could feel her. She was limp a-and *cold*. And now...now that vision might actually – "

"No," Hopper interrupted in a sharp and authoritative tone as he looked at Mike for a moment. "They *won't* kill her kid, they wouldn't go through all of this effort to kill her. She's a gold mine to them."

They would never kill her."

"But we can't just *leave* her there!" Mike exclaimed flinging his arms up in frustration, his chest painfully tight with worry. "She deserves to be h-home, with me a-and her friends," he choked, warm tears running down his cheeks.

Hopper eyed the road wearily, a tension in his face as he listened to the heart broken boy. He knew that Wheeler was practically falling apart next to him and he couldn't let that happen, especially when they had El's rescue to think about.

"Listen kid, here's what's going to happen. We are going to get to that warehouse, we are going to talk to Kali. Yes, *both* of us." Hopper reiterated in a stern voice when Mike made a scoffing noise in protest.

"We are going to get her to help us and then as a team we *will* rescue El and bring down that god forsaken organisation. If you don't think you can do that Wheeler, then tell me, because I will turn back *right now* and take you to Joyce's house."

Hopper felt slightly guilty for his sharp and direct words, but he knew that despite the heart break Mike was clearly feeling right now, he needed to focus on what was most important, and that was getting El back by *any* means. Even if it included bringing Kali in on the rescue operation.

"Fine," Mike huffed in a frustrated mumble as he crossed his jittery arms, his hands pressed against his sides like he was barely holding himself together.

"Good," Hopper sighed in relief, his focus back in full force when he saw they were approaching the docks. "I'm gonna pull up here," he said quietly to Mike just as he turned the steering wheel and parked up on the quiet road that led onto the docks.

Mike didn't need any prompting to wrench open the passenger door and hurry out of the vehicle, after all, the quicker they were at the docks, the quicker they could get to El.

Hopper moved to the trunk of the black car, carefully arming himself with two concealed guns. When Mike gave him a wild look he sighed in exasperation, "she's probably not gonna be up to guests kid, we need *some* kind of protection." Hopper watched the pale boy nod numbly and gave him a stern look with his piercing blue eyes, "you are to stay behind me. Got it Wheeler?"

"Yeah," Mike muttered with a roll of his eyes as Hopper slammed the trunk shut, locked the car and then motioned for the Paladin to follow him.

Mike couldn't stop from shaking, his fear of losing El mixing with the adrenaline pumping through his blood. He didn't know how he was going to react to seeing Kali again or what kind of state she would be in, but he tried desperately to remember that this would all help in the effort to getting El back. That was the only thing that mattered to him.

The night was completely drawing in now, Mike seeing his uneven breath coming out as warm vapour being carried away into the cold air. He followed Hopper, stopping when he stopped, looking around when the Chief carefully checked the area before continuing.

They were getting further out now, Mike trying desperately not to think about how the last time he was here it was with El. How she was probably taken from this god damn place only a few hours earlier. His stomach clenched, and he felt faint at the idea of her being dragged into a van.

"You okay kid?" Hopper asked, his brow knitting with concern as he turned back to Mike hearing his unsteady breaths.

"Yeah," Mike said in a strangled voice, knowing he wouldn't be okay until he had El back, safe and sound in his arms where he would keep her forever. Tears pricked at his eyes and he blinked them back rapidly, knowing that this was the time to be brave, for El.

As they got closer to the warehouses, a figure appeared from behind a storage unit, his form mainly a shadow until he stepped forward, closer to Mike and Hopper who had his hand over his gun, just in

case.

"Hey Chief," came the voice of Steve Harrington, his hair in a mullet style without a strand out of place and his hands on his hips as he gave his partner a weak but determined smile before turning his attention onto the young man in surprise.

"Steve *Harrington*?" Mike asked in utter confusion. What the hell was Steve doing here? Since when did he become a police officer? To Mike he had always seemed like the kind of guy who was set to follow in his dad's footsteps and go into the family business.

"Mike *Wheeler*?" Steve gaped in surprise. "What the hell are you doing here? And when did you get so tall? You're like a *giraffe*!"

"Okay there's no time for this Harrington," Hopper cut in with a frustrated glare at his much younger partner who cleared his throat and nodded sombrelly.

"How long has she been back?" Hopper asked Steve quietly as the three men moved towards the warehouse.

"About ten minutes." Steve whispered in response, his laid-back attitude changing to something much more serious and professional, as his fingers brushed the top of his gun. "Her and the tall guy have been wandering around Chicago for most of the day...I'm not sure what they were looking for though."

Hopper exhaled a deep breath out of his nose, his bushy eyebrows lowered with determination. "Well, let's go find out."

The closer they got to the dilapidated warehouse the more Mike's heart sped up, his pulse pounding so loudly in his ears he could barely think straight. Through the dark he could see holes in the rusting metal where it had been violently shredded open by bullets. Mike's stomach lurched in horror and a sweat beaded to the surface on his forehead as he turned his wide eyes onto Hopper.

"Shit," the Chief mumbled under his breath, his hand tightening on his gun. He straightened his broad shoulders and then pushed on, moving towards the warehouse with Mike and Steve hurrying after

him.

The door had come off its hinges and lay just away from the entrance where Mike spotted utter carnage inside of what was the living area. Sudden noise brought his attention over to the corner where Kali and who Mike believed to be Funshine were crouched either side of a dark woman who was barely conscious. They were pressing down on her side and Mike gaped in horror as his gaze flickered around at all the blood that surrounded her.

Hearing the footsteps entering the warehouse, Kali looked up instantly, her eyes wild with grief and anger and her face wet and swollen from tears. She went to lower her head, a threatening look entering her dark eyes. Mike hesitantly stepped forward, "Kali the lab did this. They've got El," he said, choking out El's name as the reality of the situation hit him straight in the chest.

Kali blinked in confusion, her lips slightly parted as she looked from the three men, to Funshine and then onto who Mike now realised was Mick. "It's true," the dying woman croaked, coughing as blood pooled around her mouth. "They sedated her...t-took her..."

"Shhh don't try to talk," Funshine said calmly in his rumbling deep voice as he continued to press down on Mick's wound and shared a desperate look with Kali.

Mike's heart was in his throat, the idea of El being sedated running through his mind while the images in front of him would haunt him forever. He could see two other bodies belonging to the gang, both clearly dead. The rest of the space was a mess, broken furniture and cracked walls. There were blood splatters here and there but no other bodies.

"Can you let me see if I can try and help her?" Hopper's strong voice called through the horrible tension as he took a hesitant step closer to Kali, Funshine and Mick.

"No," Kali said trembling with rage, her bloodied fingers still trying to stop Mick's wound from bleeding any further. "Get out of here, *all* of you." Her eyes flashed to Mike, but he didn't back down, staring back at her with his own anger burning like embers in his eyes.

"K-Kali," Mick croaked, her ashen face turning slightly to look at her friend. Kali stared back at her, tears swimming in her eyes. "You've got...you've got to s-save Eleven..."

They all watched on as Mick's breath stuttered in her chest and then she was still, her eyes still open but glazed over as Kali gasped through a sob and Funshine sniffled as he closed their friend's eyes.

Hopper, Steve and Mike felt useless and almost disrespectful as all they could do was watch Kali and Funshine's grief at losing their whole family in one night. They didn't know how long they stood there, the gravity of the situation making Mike feel sick all over again, his head spinning with fear and anxiety.

Eventually Kali removed her hands off Mick's wound, wiping at her tears with the back of her heavy black coat sleeve, her face streaked with dark kohl make up stains. Her shoulders tensed and there was an ominous look on her face as she got uneasily to her feet.

The men all watched her cautiously as she walked over to where the body of Axel was, her shaking hands reaching for the guns that had fallen to the ground around him. She started to load them, her face a cloud of anger.

Funshine got to his feet, a bit more put together than Kali, but a frown etched on his forehead. "Kali," he called to her calmly.

"I'm going to get my sister back," she announced sharply to the room, her dark eyes not leaving the guns and ammunition that she was collecting. "And then I will kill *every single one* of those bastards."

Hopper sighed, "that's why we're here. We know where the lab is, I have a double agent working there. We need your help Kali, we *all* need to join forces if we want to save El and bring down that god forsaken place."

In the blink of an eye Kali raised the gun she was holding so it was pointing at Hopper, Mike startled shouting in protest, and Steve lifted his own gun at Kali in response. "Put the gun down," he warned her, but she continued to stare at the Chief with contempt in her eyes while Funshine hurried to her side. Hopper stared back calmly at

Kali, barely blinking.

"Who even are you?" Kali hissed through clenched teeth. "And why do you think I would need *your* help?"

Hopper sighed heavily, keeping his gaze on Kali and Kali alone. "That lab killed my daughter, I want revenge too. I care about El, we all do, and we need to get her back. And then I want to expose that lab for what they really are, *murderers, abductors.*"

He carefully moved his hand to his chest and showed her his badge, "I'm the Chief of Police in Hawkins, I have weapons at my disposal, a bigger team if we require it. But more than that I'm a father," Hopper swallowed thickly, his blue eyes softer as Kali's dark gaze flickered slowly with humanity. "I'm a father who lost his little girl because of that lab. I can't let them take any more children, I can't allow them to lock El back up there. Please Kali, if we join force than we have every chance of winning this."

There was silence for the moment, Mike, Funshine and Steve looking at each other nervously, all of them willing Kali to agree to them joining forces. It was true, they needed her. They needed her powers, her strength and her will to fight.

Kali slowly lowered the gun, her hand still trembling as she dropped it to her side. Steve hesitantly put his own gun back in its holster. "Fine," Kali said sombrely, "I will go with you." Her eyes flashed to Mike and her gaze filled with hatred once more. "On the condition that *he* doesn't come."

"That's fi – "

"No!" Mike shouted in indignation, shooting Hopper an angry glare at almost agreeing with Kali. He turned his eyes back onto El's sister and tightened his jaw in defiance. "I'm going. You have to accept that. You have to accept that I love your sister and she loves me."

Kali laughed harshly and took a step closer to Mike, "she doesn't know what love is! She was brought up in that lab since she was practically *born.*"

"Don't insult her intelligence," Mike snarled taking a step closer to Kali, no longer afraid of her powers as his jaw clenched in anger. "And don't insult her *feelings*. You know she loves you too, right? That she came back here today to warn you about the lab and to see if she could forgive you for what you did."

Kali's dark demeanour cracked for a moment and she inhaled a sharp breath. "This is *your* fault," she whispered in a menacing voice, her eyes flashing with fire. "She would have still been here if it wasn't for you. Funshine and me wouldn't have been out looking for her, we... we all could have fought off the bad men."

Mike laughed harshly in surprise and fury. "No, it's *your* fault! If you had never pushed her all these years to find Brenner than maybe she would have been able to figure it out on her own sooner? You kept her trapped! You don't even *know* the real El!"

"Stop this right now," Hopper warned as he started to get between Mike and Kali who had got a lot closer to each other, both trembling with anger and grief.

"What and I suppose *you* know the real El?! You weren't there in the lab, you didn't see what they did to us. The experiments, the punishments. You have *no idea* who she is!" Kali practically screamed, her face livid.

"You're wrong," Mike shouted back, shaking with anguish. "I know what makes her laugh, what makes her smile, I know when she's scared just by a look in her eyes, I know what her favourite movie is, I know how she wishes for a future different from the shit world you have her stuck in, I know what she wants in life. I'm *in love* with her Kali – "

"I love her! She's *my* sister!"

"*She's my girlfriend!*"

"STOP!" Hopper bellowed, his face filled with fury and disappointment in Kali and Mike. He looked between them both in exasperation. "This is *ridiculous*! Look at you both. You both say how much you love El and want to save her, and yet here you both are

screaming at each other instead of doing something about it!"

Mike dropped his gaze feeling ashamed of himself as Hopper's words repeated again and again in his mind. Kali blinked and looked away, her jaw still tight.

"We all need to work together if we want to get her back. That's what you both want, *right*?"

"Yes," Mike and Kali answered in unison.

"Good," Hopper sighed heavily, his breath coming out sharply through his nose as he glanced between the pair. "Now I want you to shake hands," when Mike gave him a look of disgust he glared at him. "I said, I want you *both* to shake hands. This feud, it ends *right now*. El is more important."

Mike bit his tongue in frustration and slowly caught Kali's gaze. Her eyes were still angry, but they had settled slightly. He took a cautious step closer to her and begrudging held out his hand. She looked at it with contempt as if it were dirty, but still raised her own hand. They shook quickly, both ready to release their hands and look away from each other.

"Good," Hopper repeated with a nod on his head and a determination filling his eyes. He looked around the space in thought for a moment and then turned his attention back onto Kali and Funshine who were looking at him. "You can't come back here, take what you need and then we need to go."

"Where will we go?" Funshine asked in his soothing voice as he looked at the Chief.

"A friend of mine's house. They're all awaiting word on El anyway..."

Kali looked up at Hopper, an odd expression written across her face as if she was trying to comprehend that El could know even *more* people in the outside world. But for once she bit down her question and looked around the space wearily. "Let's start with the weapons," she mumbled to Funshine. He nodded and joined her, Steve and Hopper hesitantly helping too.

Mike stood there, his heart racing as he glanced around wondering what he could do to help. Kali looked up and they caught each other's gazes, both of them reluctant. She took a deep breath and then said the words almost like they were painful, "get El's stuff out of her room. I suspect she will be wanting them when we get her out of that hell hole."

Even Hopper, Funshine and Steve looked up at Kali in surprise at her method of extending the olive branch to Mike. He stared back at her in stunned silence for a moment, allowing the words to process in his mind before he nodded his head and hurried over to the rickety stairs.

He could hear his pulse pounding in his ears as he walked down the cold dark corridor, remembering how El had held his hand and pulled him along to her room, looking back at him with a soft yet shy smile.

Mike could feel his tired body shaking with emotions and as he stood in the doorway to her bedroom he tried desperately to hold it together.

"What do you think?" El asked anxiously as she flicked the switch on the wall and her bedroom came to light in a hue of warm yellow.

Mike walked over by the bed, turning on a switch so that the fairy lights which had been strung to the ceiling came to life, adding warmth and a glister of magic to the room. His heart was in his throat as he looked around, taking in the broken dresser that El had hurled Kali at and the pink and purple patchwork duvet where Mike and El had sat together, comforting one another, cuddling, kissing.

It was too much, and Mike searched around for a duffel bag, finding one under the bed that he used to gather El's clothes in, recognising the ones that Max and Joyce had bought her and carefully folding them into the large bag.

His fingers shook when he grabbed the small pile of Disney videos, *'The Little Mermaid'* on the top. Mike gasped, keeping his tears at bay as he put the VHS videos in the bag, trying to make sure they were well protected. After all, these were El's possessions, her *only*

possessions. And Mike wanted to treat them like precious jewels.

He was so caught up in the emotion that he didn't even cringe when grabbing her underwear and bras, putting them in the bag without a second thought before moving onto her cosmetics.

Mike's amber eyes flickered to something sparkly, and he realised it was the red glittery gift bag that held El's Valentine's gifts. He remembered the radiant glow of happiness in her face when he had presented her with the toy Flounder, the Valentine's card and chocolate. Mike choked back more tears and zipped up the duffel bag, ignoring how heavy the strap was against his shoulder as he reached for the gift bag, the string handles held tightly in his grasp.

Mike looked around the room one more time, wondering if El had known when they left that she would never get to come into this room again. He only hoped he had taken everything that was important to her. Inhaling and exhaling a shaky breath, Mike reached for the light switch, flooding the room back into darkness.

Mike stepped carefully down the rusty stairs, his eyes down and filled with sorrow while Hopper looked up at him in concern. He sighed heavily and then turned his focus onto Kali and Funshine who were both holding their own bags, Steve handling most of the weapons.

"Are you ready to go?" Hopper asked them both, his eyes lingering again on Mike who looked like a breath of air would knock him over.

Kali and Funshine exchanged a look; sadness, grief and determination passing through their gaze. Kali swallowed anxiously and nodded her head, looking back at the Chief. "Yes."

The tension in the Byers house couldn't be cut with a knife. Everyone was scared and anxious as they went through the motions, waiting for Hopper and Mike to come home, secretly praying they returned with El.

Joyce had made endless hot drinks, feeling like she had to do *something*. Max had gotten so frustrated with the long wait and her building emotions that she had burst into tears, Lucas immediately

bring her into his hold and stroking her long red hair while kissing her temple, promising it would all be okay in the end.

Nancy paced the room in a good imitation of Mike, her arms wrapped around her petite frame as she worried about what trouble her brother might have gotten himself into. Jonathan watched her in concern, stopping her now and again, his hands gentle on her shoulders as he hugged her.

Will sat in the armchair, nervously biting at the edge of his thumb, wishing he could have gone with Hopper and Mike, knowing that his powers could finally come in use and do some good.

Dustin was trying to make jokes to ease the tension, reminding them all that El was a superhero and could totally kick ass if needed. When his jokes just landed on deaf ears Dustin sighed, his smiling drifting away as he hurried to help Joyce with more drinks.

It felt like it had been way too long before Hopper and Mike finally arrived back, only they weren't alone, and their company was not at all who anyone expected.

"Steve?!" Nancy and Jonathan asked in unison, their voices the tone of surprise and confusion at seeing Nancy's ex-boyfriend enter the house after Hopper.

"Sup guys," Steve waved awkwardly, his attention moving away from the couple and onto the college students. "Dustin my man! It's been too long," he said cheerfully rushing forward to hug Dustin who seemed relieved and happy to see Steve.

"Since when are you a cop Steve?!" Dustin chuckled in amazement, pulling back to look at the man who used to babysit him.

"I couldn't be a babysitter forever," Steve shrugged with a grin. "Besides, this pays better."

Hopper rolled his eyes and cleared his throat to get the attention of the room as he stepped aside and let Mike, Kali and Funshine walk into the house. Dustin, Lucas and Will gaped in awe and intimidation at Funshine who was broad, tall and muscular.

Nancy hurried forward to hug Mike, seeing how pale and drained he looked. He practically fell into her arms, clutching her tightly and sniffing as he closed his eyes.

Hopper exchanged a look with Joyce who was staring between the new additions. "I hope you don't mind me asking them here," he said under his breath to Joyce who blinked out of her gaze and looked up at him with a soft smile.

"It's fine Hop," she whispered back, touching his arm for a moment. They both continued to stare at each other, their smiles drifting away to something softer before they looked away, with flushed cheeks.

Max was staring at Kali, her blue sharp eyes narrowed. It couldn't have been more obvious that she had wanted El to have been there instead of Kali, but Lucas quickly grasped Max's hand, making her look up at her boyfriend who gave her a reproachful stare and shook his head gently. Now wasn't the time for more fighting amongst themselves.

"I know you've all got questions, and I will answer them," Hopper said as he moved into the living room, the group all following behind him like ducklings. He put his gun down on the coffee table and turned around to look at Mike, who appeared to be close to collapsing, the only thing keeping him up was Nancy's arms.

"I've been in contact with Owens and he'll be with us all in about an hour and a half. From there we will make a plan and decide who's going to the lab, but for now..." Hopper turned to look at Mike again. "Kid you need to go lie down."

"No, I'm fine," Mike mumbled weakly, shaking his head.

"It wasn't a question," Hopper said sternly as he walked over to Mike, relinquishing Nancy's hold from her brother and putting his own strong arm around the boy.

"He can have my bed Hop," Will said, a look of concern on his own face as he appraised his best friend. "I doubt I'll sleep anyway..."

Hopper gave Will a small thankful smile before turning his attention

onto Mike who was trying to protest as he steered him in the direction of the stairs. "Come on kid," he ushered him. "The more sleep you get, the more energy you'll have to help El."

His words seemed to perk Mike up to the point where he gripped onto the banister and slowly heaved his body up the stairs, Hopper staying close by in case he stumbled or fell.

They finally reached Will's room and Mike collapsed onto the bed, a huff of air escaping his lungs as he curled up on his side in the fetal position, looking incredibly lost. Hopper frowned sadly and gently patted Mike's shoulder, "get some sleep kid."

The room was dark, but Mike's eyes had adjusted to the lack of light as he stared ahead, feeling cold and despondent without El's warm body against his own. It was too painful to think that was how he had started his day, with her safe in his arms.

Tear fell freely from his eyes, spilling down his cheeks and onto Will's pillow. Mike bit down on his trembling lower lip, not wanting to cry too loudly and alert attention from downstairs. He wiped furiously at his eyes and his nose, sniffing and gasping for air.

When Mike removed his now wet arm from his face he realised that his winter coat was slung on the back of Will's desk chair and his heart jumped into his throat as a sudden realisation hit him, so quickly and abruptly it was painful.

Mike's eyes were even wider when El happily handed over the gifts and red sealed card. He seemed in disbelief and he blinked, his eyes vulnerable as he looked at his girlfriend. "No one has ever got me anything for Valentine's day before," he admitted.

El's gaze immediately softened and she smiled loving at him, "well we will have plenty of Valentine's days to make up for that." Her words were filled with determination but also a promise. A promise that they would have the rest of their lives to celebrate their love.

Mike grinned, his vulnerability disappearing and being replaced with assurance, trust and warmth. "Promise?" he whispered delicately as his

eyes locked with El's.

She squeezed their joined hand and leaned up on her tip toes, kissing the tip of Mike's nose and smiling. "Promise."

Mike beamed with happiness and playfully pulled El over to the steps, both of them sitting down and exchanging gifts. "I'm going to open this later if that's okay?" Mike said indicating to his card and tucking it inside of his winter coat.

Mike sprang from the bed, stumbling over to the desk chair and grabbing the jacket, his hands fumbling with the large inside pocket as he pulled out the slightly bent and creased sealed card.

With trembling hands and stuttered breath Mike walked slowly back over to the bed, sitting down on the edge and hesitantly opening the red envelope. He was shaking as he turned the card over and let out a short laugh through his tears at how very *El* the card was.

It was *'The Little Mermaid'* boat scene with Ariel and Prince Eric holding hands, a heart shaped light created by fireflies in between them and the caption, *"You Mer-Maid For Me"* written in italics at the top.

Mike smiled slightly through his tears and opened the card up, his eyes flickering over El's untidy scrawl. He was amazed by her writing, no matter how messy it was, because it was *hers*.

Mike,

I don't know what I am meant to write in these cards.

You always smell really good, even when you fall over and get covered in dirt. You are weird like me, you are very beautiful, more handsome than any Disney prince.

You think I am pretty and you give me goose bumps when you smile at me. You make my heart sing, you make me smile and laugh.

I love you. I am so happy I have found you and I never want to let you go.

I love you always. Promise.

El x

Mike didn't know how many times he reread her words, needing them desperately like oxygen. He was quivering, his face drenched in tears and he didn't even realise he was sobbing, blinking rapidly as he tried to see the words clearly although his sight was blurry.

All of a sudden, arms were engulfing him. Mike closed his eyes and his sobs became wretched, ugly and painful. He didn't need to open his eyes to know it was Will, Dustin, Lucas and Max.

"I n-need her b-back," Mike cried out desperately, his voice a trembling mess.

"We are going to get her back, " Max said fiercely, but her own voice was shaking and sounded choked too.

"We *promise* Mike," Will whispered with a determined assurance.

"It's gonna be okay buddy," Lucas added soothingly while Mike choked on his sobs.

"We are all in this together Mike, you're *not* alone." Dustin said seriously before a grin lifted his lips. "When a party member requires assistance..."

Mike gasped, pulling away slightly so he could look up at his four friends, all of them giving him looks of sympathy, support and courage. He smiled weakly, "it is our duty to provide that assistance."

AN: They're all coming to get you El! Don't worry!

Okay so I know a lot of you hated me after the last chapter and you probably still hate me, haha. But please remember that I am following a loose Disney narrative here! I'm all for happy endings :-D

Thank you so much for reading! I'll try and get the next chapter out to you as soon as I can. Life has been busy and sometimes writing can't be my main priority, no matter how much I would love it to be!

sobs

I'm participating in Mileven Week which starts November 6th, so expect to see a daily one shot from me. I hope you enjoyed them all!

My Instagram and Tumblr username is fangirlingstrangerthings if anyone wants to come say hi or shout at me haha

16. Lost and Found

Part of Your World

AN: YOU GUYS I'M BACK!

I want to apologise for taking so, so long to update! Life has been absolutely crazy. Honesty post – in the last two months me and my partner of 8 years have split up, I've moved house twice and I'm still unpacking and I've started a new job. So in all seriousness I have been very busy, stressed and emotional and not in the right frame of mind to write.

But I finally feel like my life is slotting back into place. I feel stronger than ever and I want to thank each and every one of you who has been leaving comments and private messages asking if I'm okay! You guys are the best. :-)

I hope I can make it up to you with this 12K chapter! XD

Chapter 16: Lost and Found

February 16th 1992

Her head was swimming, voices murmured around her, the smell of iodine and bleach hitting her nose before she would be pulled back into unconsciousness. She had no concept of time, no concept of self.

She was in a world of darkness, feeling constricted and heavy. When her senses started to prickle and come back to life, there would be a sharp pain in her neck and she was gone again. Nothing to remotely think about, nothing to fear.

Many hours later El's eyelashes fluttered sleepily as her blurry vision finally started to take over. It wasn't sight that was the first thing that became apparent to her. It was the cold. *She* was cold. A shiver ran over her skin, freezing her to the bone.

El slowly blinked trying to clear not only her foggy vision but the confusion of her swirling thoughts as she slowly tried to piece

together where she was and how she had got there.

She sluggishly moved her head, her whole body feeling incredibly heavy, every move exhausting her. Her vision began to focus, her eyes taking in a white tiled wall while her ears pricked from the sound of low voices. "She's awake, should we inform Doctor Brenner?"

"Yes," came the satisfied voice of a woman. "He said he wanted to know right away."

El's heart began to pick up speed as a flurry of memories flashed before her eyes. Screaming, gun fire, pain, fear, that same woman's voice saying "kill them" with no remorse before everything had gone black.

"Mike," El croaked, her voice weak and coming out in a whimper. Her chest was heaving as she tried to breathe, unable to comprehend that she could possibly be back in her prison with the monster she had once called papa.

*I need to get out of here. **Now.***

El went to move, finding it near impossible. Her body was weak but after a moment of struggling she realised that she was restrained to a hospital bed. Her hands tied down in leather bounds. She looked down and realised she was wearing a hospital gown, the starch white and generic pattern making her blood boil with anger.

The sudden sound of heels clicking against the tiled floor made El whip her head to the side, her eyes widening slightly as she saw the woman she remembered as Connie Frazier, Brenner's right-hand woman who was just as evil as the man himself.

"Well look who finally returned to us," Connie said with a sickly-sweet smile, her dark eyes dead and cold.

El's eyes narrowed, her whole body trembling with a mixture of the cold creeping into her bones and anger at seeing the woman who had murdered so many people. People El had cared about.

"I didn't return," El said through gritted teeth, her voice returning like

the building strength inside of her. "*You forced me here. You killed.*"

"You've killed too," Connie answered, quick as a flash as she took another step closer to El, appraising her.

Hot tears prickled at El's eyes but her resolve didn't break. "Only to *protect*. Only because I *had* to."

Connie laughed, the twinkle of glee in her laughter making El more furious than she had ever been. She stared at the woman, anger and revenge flicking in her hazel eyes as she lowered her chin ready to end this poor excuse of a human being.

Connie gasped, her hands rising to her neck where she could feel El choking her. It was taking all of her strength, her young body shaking violently. Before she could do more than make the monster of a woman's eyes widen in shock, she heard hurried footsteps, one pair of hands forcing her head straight while the other put a leather-bound tie over her eyes.

"No!" El screamed, trying to writhe away from the hands of the doctors. She couldn't see anything, infuriated by Connie's coughs and gasps of air as El could no longer keep her focus on destroying the woman.

"She's gotten stronger," one of the doctors nervously exclaimed, the sound of a pen hurrying against paper.

"We will need to think of a more *permanent* solution to get her to behave," Connie's venomous voice hissed.

"You can't keep me here forever," El shouted in anger, wanting to kick herself when an undertone of fear wavered into her voice.

The sound of Connie's heels came closer again, El practically feeling the wretched woman looming over her until she felt a sharp slap to her cheek, her head being forced to the side with the strength of the smack. Her skin throbbed from the pain, but she refused to let Connie know she had hurt her.

The woman leaned in, her breath hot and disgusting against El's ear. "You are going to spend the *rest* of your life here. *Lab rat.*"

El turned her head in Connie's direction and used all of her remaining force to spit at the woman. She smirked to herself feeling pleased when the special agent gasped in disgust, clearly proving El had reached her target. The second slap was almost worth it.

The words were not.

"You know you talk in your sleep? *Mike! Mike!*" Connie said in a mockingly distressed voice while El's blood turned to ice. "We found you little lab rat. It won't be long before we find out who this *Mike* is. And rest assured that he will get the same fate as your friends did yesterday."

El's voice caught in her throat, tears rolling down her frozen cheeks from under the leather-bound tie. Her heart raced frantically, panic rising inside of her like a wild fire. They knew her greatest weakness, they knew she would do anything to prevent Mike getting hurt. They really had her, and they were *never* going to let her go.

Mike's dreams were more like nightmares, sweat beading on his forehead, his eyelids twitching and his body trembling as El's screams and pleas for help echoed around his skull. It was like a constant torture he couldn't awake from.

Despite his spinning head and racing heartbeat, Mike was thankful when Hopper woke him up, with a large hand on his shoulder, shaking him slightly while whispering, "kid, Owens is here."

Mike opened his blearily eyes, blinking heavily as he stared back at Hopper, his despair flickering with the hint of hope as he slowly nodded his head.

"What time is it?" Dustin mumbled from Mike's side, lifting his head off the Paladin's shoulder.

Will's bed was positioned against the wall and the party had all fallen asleep sat up, their heads either lulling forward or falling to their friends' shoulders.

"It's just gone 4am," Hopper replied as he straightened back up,

Mike's gaze turned to the window where the world was dark except for the orange hue of light pollution. He rubbed his eyes and sighed heavily, praying that El was sleeping and not experiencing a living nightmare.

"What time did Owens get here?" Max asked, her voice slightly croaky from sleep as she stretched her arms and got off the bed, pulling Lucas along with her.

"About an hour ago," Hopper explained as he moved towards the bedroom door to exit the room.

Mike's eyebrows jumped up his forehead and he frowned, feeling frustrated and angry. "And why did you let us sleep?" he asked sharply getting off the bed. "We could already be on our way to El by now!"

The Chief stared at Mike as if debating whether to bite back before rubbing at his lined forehead. "You needed the sleep honestly, and it's taken about an hour for Kali to understand that Sam Owens might be a doctor, but he's very different to Brenner and those other sick sons of bitches."

For a moment Mike had completely forgotten that Kali and Funshine were even in the house. Fury bubbled up in his gut when he thought of El's sister, but he quickly bit his tongue, reprimanding himself for still holding a grudge when El's life was in jeopardy. They all had to work together if they wanted her back and Mike would do *anything* for the woman he loved.

He stayed quiet as they all followed Hopper down the stairs, the only sound being the creaking of the old wood under their feet and the quiet murmur of voices in the living room. When they rounded the corner and entered the space, Mike's tired amber eyes flickered between Kali who glanced up at him, both of them sharing an almost neutral disdain before he moved his gaze onto the new figure.

Dr Sam Owens turned to face Mike, Hopper and the rest of the party from where he had been speaking quietly with Joyce, both of them clutching coffee mugs in their hands. He had kind eyes as he appraised the group, a sad but greeting smile on his face. "I see we

have even more troops," he said in what he clearly hoped was an encouraging voice.

Hopper put a hand on Mike's shoulder before looking up at Owens. "Sam, this is Mike...El's boyfriend."

"Ah," Sam said with a sigh walking forward, extending his hand to the defeated young man. "It's good to meet you Mike." They both shook hands, Mike giving Owens a feeble smile in greeting. The doctor gave him a strong look in return, "don't worry, we're going to get her out of that place."

"Thank you," Mike mumbled as they dropped each other's hands. He wanted to believe what Owens said, but he knew it wasn't going to be as easy as they all wished it would be. He had seen for himself the devastation that the lab had left in the warehouse.

Owens sighed heavily and looked around at the room of people. "I suppose we best get started."

Everyone took a seat either on the couches or the floor, Hopper stood casually by the entrance to the living room while Mike fidgeted, leaning against the wall as he thought constantly of El.

Owens talked about the lab, unveiling a large map of the building, harsh white paper curled up tightly that he pressed down against the coffee table while all of the gazes flickered over the design of the building. It wasn't as large as Mike suspected, but he realised that was probably because according to Owens this laboratory and the doctors within it were no longer endorsed by the government.

"So where exactly is this lab?" Kali asked sharply from where she sat next to Funshine, her chipped black painted nails digging into her knees.

"Just outside of Indianapolis, about a four hour car ride from here," Owens explained looking up briefly at Kali before his kind eyes moved back down to the plans. He gulped anxiously before tapping his finger down to a row of small rooms.

"They are keeping her in this room. Security was incredibly tight as

you can imagine," Owens murmured while white hot anger raced through Mike's blood. He clenched his fists trying desperately to stay in control. He hated to think of El cold and alone in one of these holding cells. They were treating her worse than an animal and it broke Mike's heart into a thousand pieces.

Owens looked up at Hopper and sighed, "it's not a big team Chief but the agents are specially trained, it's going to be near impossible to get close to her."

"It's not impossible with my powers," Kali spoke up, the whole room of people turning to look at her. "Me and my sister escaped the Hawkins lab which was much larger than this shamle of a building." She pointed to the building plans with disgust before looking up at the group. "I don't need any help, I can do this alone."

"That is all well and good Miss Prasad," Owens said gravely before chancing a nervous glance at Mike. "But you don't know what condition El might be in. You can't look after her, conceal both of yourselves and get out of the building in one piece."

Mike felt any colour in his face slowly fading away as the doctor's word rang through his head, the idea of them torturing El making him feeling faint, his stomach twisting so much he thought he might be sick. But knowing that El could be in danger only fuelled his courage, he knew that when it came down to it he would protect her from anything. He could, and he *would* fight for her.

"So," Dustin said clapping his palms together, his eyes set with determination. "What do we do first?"

Hopper looked up sharply at Dustin, his eyes bewildered before he shook his head, "no way. You're not all going to this lab."

There was an immediate outburst from the room, not only the party objecting but Joyce, Jonathan and Nancy too.

"Are you crazy? *Of course* we're all going," Max said with aggression as she stood up from the couch, her fists clenched.

"Yeah!" Lucas nodded in agreement with her girlfriend before

standing at her side. "A party member requires assistance and - "

"- it's our duty to provide that assistance." Joyce finished Lucas's sentence, shocking the whole room who stared at her in a mixture of surprise and in the party's case respect. But she wasn't looking at anyone but Hopper, her warm chocolate brown eyes soft but set with a determined edge.

Joyce walked towards the Chief who was looking at her with a slight frown, confliction fighting in his eyes.

"Hop," Joyce sighed heavily, her voice beseeching as she pressed her palm to his crossed arms. "We're all going. We have to save her. We have to close down that lab once and for all."

"Joyce..." Hopper murmured in a slightly choked voice, his eyes filling with concern. "It's dangerous. For the kids...for you..."

"No more dangerous than the life I've been living up until this point," Joyce sniffed in resentment as she lifted her chin. "We've been running from them for long enough...and now they take one of our own. They can't get away with this anymore."

Mike couldn't help the admiration and pride he felt towards Joyce. A small smile lit up his face and a fire burned in his chest as he allowed the mother's determination and fight to fill his senses. They would fight, they *all* would. And they would get back his girl, no matter what it took. El would be free, Kali would be free, Will and Joyce too. No more running, no more fear. They could do this.

El didn't know how long she had been lying on the hospital bed for. Her wrists ached from the restraints and the darkness that surrounded her eyes made her lethargic body even more exhausted. But she couldn't sleep, she refused.

There were two very real fears keeping her awake, seeping into her conscious mind and stirring anxiety and an ache into her stomach, twisting like a sharp coil. The most important fear was what they would do to Mike if they caught him, if they truly figured out how much El loved him. How she would do *anything* for him, die for him,

kill for him if necessary.

The second fear was the impending moment when she would have to see Brenner, have to look into the eyes of the man she had once called papa. But there was no love there, no want to make him proud by enduring endless cruel tests. Her fear was that she would be stuck here with him, with Connie, the scientists and special agents for the rest of her life. Forced to be caged, to exist instead of living the life she had merely had a taste of on the tip of her tongue.

Her heart jumped as the distant sound of doors opening and footsteps echoing across the linoleum starch white floors twitched her ears. She felt on high alert, every muscle and cell awake and ready to fight back.

The noise was coming closer until the doctors in the room hurried over to the door, the sound of beeping as the secure pin was entered into the keypad, and the glass door slid open, more footsteps, more people entering the room that El was being kept. She lay still, her body pensive and waiting for the moment that *he* would speak. She knew he was there, she could tell from the heavy boots of the guards inevitably surrounding him, keeping their boss safe.

There was an eerie silence before quiet footsteps came closer to where El was restrained. Her heart was hammering in anticipation and her throat was drying up as she tried to remain calm, tried to think about Mike and how he had built her confidence, had made her strong for this exact moment. The moment she had experienced nightmares over, the moment she had always known was coming, but never expected to feel ready for, to feel brave enough to deal with.

"Welcome home Eleven."

Maybe if she hadn't spent weeks in the void facing up to her demons the sound of Brenner's voice might have gone through her heart like shards of ice. Instead she felt a burning fire quiver in her stomach, adrenaline fuelled her blood as she fingers twitched with the need to fight.

"This isn't my home," El replied, as her voice calm and controlled.

"Your home has always been at my side Eleven," Brenner said in a soft voice, his manipulative kindness having no effect on the strong woman in front of him. "Don't let Kali turn you against me. Against the only home you've ever had."

El couldn't help the bitter laugh that escaped her throat. "It isn't Kali's fault I didn't have a home. It's *yours*." Anger started to rage through her petite frame and the careful control starting to slip away. "I know what you did to my mama. I *know*."

Brenner hummed contemplatively for a moment, El hearing the sound of his no doubt pristinely polished shoes squeaking against the flooring as he turned to his staff. "Remove her tie, I want to look into my daughter's eyes."

El gritted her teeth, fury bubbling up inside of her. "I am *not* your daughter."

Brenner chuckled slightly as El felt a rough pair of hands yanking her head forward so that the bound could be unstrapped at the back of her head and removed. The bright and artificial light of the enclosed space made her blink rapidly as she allowed the sight of the room to come into view.

Her hazel eyes moved quickly to the only escape route out of the room which was the glass door, currently guarded by two agents from the inside, and four agents on the outside. Stood to the side were three doctors, all of them in white coats looking apprehensive as they hurried to write notes. Connie was stood just slightly away from El, her arms crossed, her chin tilted up as she appraised the young girl with a look of deepest loathing. And right in front of El, with a smile on his face, his hands relaxed behind his back was Brenner. *Papa*. She looked at him, looked into the pleased and heartless eyes of her captor.

"Well you've certainly grown into quite the young woman. I've already heard about your earlier escapades with Miss Frazier," Brenner said calmly while Connie scowled, her eyes narrowing as she continued to stare at the girl who had tried to choke her to death. "I am truly proud of the woman my daughter has become."

El sharply inhaled as she stared at Brenner, her body shaking with adrenaline. "I already told you, I am *not* your daughter. I never *was* your daughter."

Brenner smirked, "then who are you the daughter of?"

"Terry Ives," El said with pride, lifting her head as much as she could watching the way the smirk lowered on Brenner's face and the way his eyes flashed with panic. "That's right," El added with fury flashing up into her hazel eyes. "I know what you did to my mama, I know how you tore me from her womb and stole me from the life I was meant to have."

There was silence for the moment, the only sound being El's harsh breathing and the sound of machines beeping. Brenner continued to stare at her, barely blinking before finally sighing condescendingly. "Your mother could never have handled the pure gifts that you possess Eleven."

"They were not your gifts to handle," El spat with venom, her body shaking, desperate to end the man who had made her life a living hell. The man who had taken her from her mother, stolen her childhood away, made her a caged animal. "They are *mine*. And now you are going to see me destroy you with them."

El went to move, her eyes narrowing quickly just as the room exploded into a commotion of guards and doctors hurrying over to her. She could barely scream before a sharp stabbing pain to her neck caught her attention and her world started to turn woozy. It was the same substance they had used on her in the warehouse and she helplessly felt her vision starting to blur even while she battled against her restraints.

Brenner stood over her, watching her intensely with a satisfied smile. "Did you really think you could fight against us? That we wouldn't have put certain precautions in place? You will continue our training Eleven, first thing in the morning. And I expect you to be compliant otherwise there will be consequences."

A single tear slid down El's cold cheek before her world went black, her stomach tightly knotted and her heart screaming out for help. For

Mike.

Mike's knee bounced anxiously as his eyes remaining plastered on the road, wondering how long it would be before they reached the lab. Dawn was fast approaching, the sky a hue of lilac and dark blue as a beam of sunlight tried to stretch across the horizon.

He took his eyes off the beckoning rise of a new day and looked towards the front of the truck where Hopper was driving, his fists clutching the steering wheel tightly, his whole focus on the road, getting them to their destination as fast as he could. Mike felt incredibly thankful for the Chief, he didn't think they would be half as organised as they were right now if it wasn't for him.

It had taken a bit more persuasion before Hopper finally gave in to the idea of the whole party, Nancy, Jonathan and Joyce coming along with him, Mike, Steve, Kali and Funshine to the lab to rescue El. Everyone wanted to help, and it appeared that everyone had a job to do.

Most of the room had been stunned when Hopper, Steve, Kali and Funshine start to pull out weapons and ammunition. But no one was more surprised than Mike when Hopper asked who had shot a gun before and Nancy had raised her hand with confidence, stepping forward.

"What?" she had shrugged looking at her young brother before picking up a revolver checking to make sure the safety was on. Her amber eyes met her brothers, an assurance lingering in her gaze. "Me and Jonathan have been to a few gun ranges, don't worry, I know my stuff."

Along with Nancy; Jonathan, Steve, Kali, Funshine, Joyce and Max joined Hopper in being gun holders for the mission. Mike noticed the nerves in Lucas's eyes when Max was handed a gun. He knew the Ranger wasn't scared of his girlfriend handling a gun, but he was clearly fearful of the idea of Max being in the thick of the fighting.

As Hopper handed out walkie talkie's he began unravelling his plan. "We're going to split into three teams. Team 1 will be myself, Mike,

Kali, Funshine, Will and Joyce. We will be the rescue team, we're going to get El."

Max scoffed, disappointed that she wasn't part of the team that would save her best friend. "Why aren't I in team 1? Wheeler can't shoot a gun and Will...no offence Will."

Will smiled weakly as if no offence was taken, Mike however went to open his mouth to answer back, but Hopper beat him. "Will is a healer, if El has been hurt in any way, we need him to help her before we make a run for it. And Wheeler...well there's no prying him away." The Chief mumbled as he handed Max a radio.

He looked at the red head before continuing on, "you, Owens, Lucas and Dustin are team 2. It is your job to get to the computer room to shut down the system and be in control of the building." Max nodded, her jaw tight as she finally gave in and accepted her job of protecting the men while they hacked into the computer system.

Hopper then moved to Steve, giving his partner a weak smile as he handed him another radio. "And Steve, Jonathan and Nancy will be team 3, their job is to clear the perimeters and make sure the getaway cars are ready at any moment's notice."

"We've can do this Chief," Steve said with a heavy exhale as he put his gun in his holster and clutched the radio.

Hopper gave him a weak smile and then looked around the room at his odd assembly of fighters. Nerds, subjects, rejects but all strong and all ready to fight to the death for their lost party member.

"Well what are we waiting for?!" Hopper barked before everyone jumped into gear.

The bright lights of a car driving in the opposite direction made Mike blink as he turned to the side window, immediately looking away when he caught Kali's dark eyes staring at him. She quickly averted her gaze too.

They had been in the truck longer than Mike could even remember, squished next to each other, Funshine sat on Kali's other side, and yet

they hadn't uttered a word to one another.

Hopper and Joyce had whispered to each other in the front of the car, sometimes glancing in the side mirrors to make sure Steve and Jonathan's cars were still trailing behind with the rest of the party. But Mike and Kali had barely acknowledged each other until this moment.

Mike could feel her eyes on him again and he sighed heavily, keeping his gaze on his hands which were bouncing on his jittery legs. "Why did you do it?" he croaked quietly, his throat dry from not being used and the lingering tiredness that loitered around his body. "Why did you make me see El like that?"

Kali clearly knew exactly what he was talking about, even before he had mentioned her sister's name. Her eyes had filled almost with remorse before she blinked and looked straight ahead. Funshine either couldn't hear Mike's question or was choosing to be diplomatic and give Kali and Mike the private talk they needed.

The Paladin slowly turned his head, wondering why it was taking her so long to answer. He observed the conflict on Kali's face, her lips parting now and again as if she was trying to find the right words that would explain her complex thought process.

"It was my worst fear too..." Kali finally whispered, her dark eyes slowly moving to look at Mike, a vulnerability in her gaze he had never seen before. He blinked in confusion, his eyebrows lowering in question as he waited for Kali to say more.

Her eyes flickered to the window, the dark brown eyes filled with the multicoloured horizon that she was staring at, deep in thought. "Eleven...*El* grew up in the lab, she doesn't remember her real family. I remember mine. Only in vague memories, voices...smiles. I knew Brenner wasn't my father...he was my abductor."

Kali flinched, and Mike felt a deep set of anger starting to rise inside of him as he thought about Brenner and all of the lives he had destroyed.

"I knew what it was like to be loved, *truly* loved. It was a feeling I

didn't think I would get again until I was introduced to my sister..."

Mike looked at Kali, his attention completely raptured by her words as she slowly broke down her barriers.

"I remember that man taking me to a play room, telling me I would be meeting my new sister. It was the early days, I had only just stopped crying every night for my own mother and father. I thought I would hate this girl...or blame her for being abducted. But when they brought out this young girl with blonde hair and hazel eyes...yes, she was blonde then," Kali added when she noticed a small smile on Mike's lips at the idea of a young El. "I knew that all I could do was love her. That my suppressed love of a family would be put onto her. That I would protect her and be the strength she needed."

Kali sighed heavily, blinking rapidly as she batted away any water that tried to fill her dark eyes. "I thought that I was the only one that she truly loved. I was...I *am* her sister, and I thought that it would always be me and her against the bad man. I didn't...I didn't anticipate that she would fall in love..." Kali looked down at her own hands, carefully turning her wrist so that the tattooed 008 was visible, Mike stared at the words with a knot in his stomach as he imagined a scared young girl being branded. No longer a human being with rights, no longer a daughter with a family. An object to be used.

Mike looked up from the tattooed number and looked up not at the fierce leader, but the scared and vulnerable girl that laid just below the surface. "Where you intimidated by me?" Mike asked quietly, his brow furrowed with his pensive thoughts

Kali's lips twitched in a small smile before slowly returning to a straight line. "More the idea of you..." she finally admitted, carefully moving her gaze onto Mike's.

"What do you mean?"

Kali stared at Mike for a moment before speaking, her words clearly thought out. "You represent El's freedom. Not just from the lab, but from me. You have given her something I never could. You have given her closure from that place, from *him*."

"No," Mike shook his head adamantly. "El did that, not me. She faced him in the void, she found him."

"Yes, but who was by her side?" Kali asked with a sad smile. "Who held her hand? Who encouraged her?"

Mike opened his mouth to speak but then shut it again as his heart squeezed uncomfortably. He thought back to his memories of the void, how the dark had always felt shielded from him by the person always stood by his side, the soft palm in his, the gentle squeeze of her fingers. Mike felt choked, his throat dry as he realised that while El had always been his strength, he was *hers*. He wiped at his eyes, shuddering a heavy breath as he turned his eyes back onto the rising sun.

There was silence for a moment, neither of them speaking as they watched the blazing orange sun lighting up the bitter cold landscape in front of them.

"You are stronger than you think you are," Kali eventually murmured, her words meant only for Mike who turned to her in surprise.

"No, I'm not. You saw how I crumbled when you made me see El dead."

Kali dipped her head in shame, "I am sorry for showing you that. I wanted to hurt you for taking my sister away. I wanted to show you what I thought would happen if she was with you. I never thought you would be able to protect her." Kali lowered her tense shoulders and looked at Mike with a sad smile, "but now I know you would do anything to protect her."

"I love her Kali, more than anything." Mike said with more certainty and strength than he had ever felt before. "I want to protect her, and I *want* to make her happy."

Kali smiled slightly, her eyes thoughtful. "You *do* make her happy. I know she was keeping your relationship from me, but even I could see the difference in her."

Mike felt his heart clench again as he realised that El's fate was in the

hands of this rescue mission, that her happiness and her future hung in the balance. He looked back up at Kali who was still appraising him. "She loves you too. You *are* her sister, you were before I was in her life and you always will be. She doesn't want to hurt you, she cares about you so much Kali."

"I know," Kali sighed. "I love her too and I *want* her to be happy. She doesn't deserve the life she's been having to lead no more than I do." The dark eyes met one another again and a steely determination was exchanged through the flicker gazes. "We will get her back Mike. And we will destroy that lab."

Mike nodded, his jaw tight with purpose but as he opened his mouth to speak, Hopper cleared his throat from the front seat. They all turned to look at the Police Chief, who was staring ahead at the long windy road that had led them to a large dark building obscured by vast trees and a high barbed wire fence. Mike's heart jumped into his throat, his pulse ringing in his ears as Hopper grumbled, "we're here."

Hopper parked a safe distance from the lab, pulling up against the tall trees, his face tight while his blue eyes darted around their new location looking for any type of threat. He exhaled a heavy breath and turned in his seat, his eyes lingering on Joyce before looking between Funshine, Kali and Mike. "Let's go."

As Mike exited the truck, his eyes went straight to the distant shape of the lab, his heart beating loudly, his fingers itching to hold El, to keep her safe from the monsters of her past. The only thing keeping him standing was knowing that she was there, *right* there in that wretched place waiting for her family, her *real* family. And Mike was never going to let her down.

The group all gathered around Hopper's truck, Max stood with a steely gaze, ready to get her best friend back, while Will and Dustin looked anxious, shuffling their feet as Lucas exhaled a shaky breath but had determination in his eyes.

Joyce, Kali and Funshine were ready to get the mission over with, loading their guns being distributed out by Steve who handed the next gun to Nancy with a nervous glance. Mike gulped anxiously

walking over to his sister. "Nance..." he started, trying to ignore the lump in his throat. But when his sister's eyes caught his own, he couldn't think of anything good enough to say and so pulled Nancy into a tight embrace. Her hand holding onto the gun went slack and she hugged him back fiercely with her arm.

"It's okay," Nancy whispered calmly, her cold palm rubbing soothingly against Mike's back. "We're going to get her back."

Mike sniffled slightly, trying to steady his racing heart as he pulled back from his sister and nodded numbly. "I know," he replied with a heave of his shoulders, a strength flashing in his eyes. He knew that they would save El, she was the most powerful person he had ever met and had love pouring in to give her the hand she needed in this moment. But Mike knew he wasn't invincible, none of them were, and there was the chance they wouldn't all make it through this day. Mike squeezed his sister's hand looking into her amber eyes as he whispered, "be careful."

Nancy smiled slightly and nodded her head, "you too."

"There'll be time for this later," Hopper grumbled at the Wheeler's, a lit cigarette placed between his lips as he took a long drag, taking a deep exhale as a plume of smoke left his mouth while he glanced around at the most peculiar rescue squad he had ever worked with.

"I hope you all know what you're letting yourselves in for," Hopper said pointing his cigarette mainly at the party. "Those agents won't hesitate to kill you. It's kill or *be* killed. I'm not sure you're ready for that," he added with a sigh.

"It doesn't matter if we're ready or not," Mike spoke up, standing tall as his amber eyes flickered to the building where he knew El was being contained. He gulped down the heavy lump in his throat and turned back to Hopper. "We're here for El, and we're not leaving without her."

"Amen to that," Dustin piped up, adjusting the bullet proof vest Hopper had handed him only minutes earlier.

"The lab can eat shit," Lucas added crossing his muscular arms in

defiance while Max smirked at him, pride in her blue eyes.

Hopper looked like he wanted to say more, but when he caught Joyce's chocolate brown eyes and she gave him a slight shake of her head, he exhaled a deep breath and nodded at the party. "Okay...well you all know your jobs. Let's get our girl back."

Hugs, embraces and words of strength were passed around the group before they split into their three teams. Steve, Nancy and Jonathan stalking the perimeter, adrenaline fuelling each one of them as they got closer to the looming prison.

Dr Owens paused as they got closer to the building, turning to the groups with a nervous expression flickering over his face. "Once we step past this point the cameras will be able to pick us up, this is it. No turning back."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Kali said, her jaw set and her eyes burning with a mixture of courage, determination and anger as she stared up at the building with disgust. She closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath before her piercing gaze flickered around the group. "The cameras will not see us now."

Hopper nodded, understanding that she was using her powers. "Let's go then."

Mike looked back at Nancy as he stayed in step with the Chief walking closer to the building and leaving his sister behind. Nancy gave him a smile and nodded her head with encouragement while Will and Joyce gave Jonathan one last fierce embrace. Dustin and Steve patted each other's shoulders, an exchange passing between them of "you can do this buddy," and "you're my favourite brother".

The teams split up, Nancy, Jonathan and Steve staying behind while Team 1 and Team 2 moved swiftly towards the entrance of the lab, their hearts in their throats jumping with every step that took them closer to danger. Mike focused on El, using his love for her to lead him like a burning torch of hope.

As they approached the gate two guards came into view, guns in their hands as they paced by their post. Mike looked nervously at Kali and

Funshine, both of them aiming their weapons at the guards.

"No," Hopper warned them. They might not be able to see us on the cameras, but I'm sure the lab will find it odd if their guards suddenly collapse." Kali glared at him but slowly lowered her weapon, Funshine accepting her decision like her second in command.

"On the way out then," Kali muttered, glancing menacingly at the guards as the group all walked past the two armed men inconspicuously. They moved in silence, trying to control their harsh breathing in the early morning frost.

"Now when we get into the lab, my team are going to need to go right towards the control room, Team 1 you need to go left. Follow the building plan like I showed you," Dr Owens whispered to the group as he wiped at his sweaty brow.

"We got it," Hopper muttered quietly, assessing the building with a dark stare. "Do what you can in that control room," he added looking at Lucas and Dustin in particular. "Use whatever nerd skills you have to open doors for us, lock the sons of bitches in their offices if you can and get us closer to El. Do whatever it takes."

"You can count on us Chief," Dustin answered breathlessly but with courage written on his young face.

"They're going to wish they never messed with us," Joyce whispered through gritted teeth as her gun clicked, signifying she had taken it off safety, ready to fire at will. Hopper glanced at her, a small smile of admiration flickering on his face before he hesitantly went back to focusing on the mission.

"Guns ready?" Hopper whispered to Kali, Funshine, Joyce and Max who all nodded in confirmation as they neared the doors. "Everyone know their task?" When Hopper was satisfied that everyone was ready, he nodded at Kali who turned her gaze onto Dr Owens, no longer cloaked by her powers.

He took a deep breath and walked up to the door, clutching his briefcase handle within a tight fist. Following his usual routine, he swiped in and passed a guard on duty, a murmured "good morning,"

exchanged between them as Owens typed in a pin and entered through another door, now within an empty corridor. He exhaled a shaky breath and nodded in the location that he knew Team 1 was stood. "Good luck," he whispered in a deep voice before heading right with Lucas, Dustin and Max.

"Right let's go," Hopper quietly muttered as Team 1 headed left, all of them still disguised by Kali's powers. A radio clutched in the Chief's hand as he waited for confirmation that Team 2 had made it to the control room safely. Once they were locked in, Kali would relinquish her power, making Lucas, Dustin and Max just as visible as Owens.

Mike watched as Kali wiped at a small fleck of blood from her nose, her determination undeterred as they moved further into the building, only passing a few members of staff. It was still early, the main shift workers not due to start for another hour.

Time seemed to be ticking so slowly while Mike's heart felt like it might burst out of his chest by how fast it was racing. Adrenaline and love were the main surgency in his body, keeping him going and making him feel stronger with every step that took him closer to danger, but closer to El.

The team froze against the wall as two flustered looking doctors passed them, muttering quietly, thinking their words were only for one another.

"She's grown too strong," one of the men said, his brow beaded with sweat while he clung onto a clipboard. "How does Dr Brenner expect us to contain her?"

"We can't keep sedating her," the other doctor agreed, his words rising an unbearable anger in Mike, his fists clenching as he went to take a step forward. Will's hand caught his shoulder and Mike turned to look at his best friend, seeing the frown and shake of Will's head, telling him no. It wasn't worth it to ruin their mission, there was too much at stake. Mike glanced over to see Kali being restrained by Hopper who seemed to be chastising her the same way Will had done to him.

The group followed the doctors, listening as they discussed increasing

El's sedation drug and what methods and medical devices could be used to force El to comply. Mike found himself shaking with rage but found his need to find his girlfriend only blazed stronger, the fire building at an increasing rate.

"Chief, come in Chief," came Dustin's hushed voice from the radio.

"Yeah kid, it's me," Hopper replied quietly, his eyes darting around the corridor as they held back even further from the two doctors that had just disappeared through a set of double doors.

"We made it into the control room, although it got kind of dicey when one of the techs asked Owens what he was doing on this side of the building..."

Hopper frowned bringing the radio closer to his lips, "and what did you say Owens?" he asked addressing the doctor instead of Dustin.

There was a bit of fumbling as the radio was clearly handed over before Owens replied, "well I didn't thankfully have to explain much before Miss Mayfield over here knocked him out. We locked him in a broom cupboard, but he should be out for a good hour by the punching he got."

Hopper nodded, unable to resist the urge to roll his eyes at Max's actions before returning to the pressing matter at hand. "Can you see all the cameras? Where is El?"

This time the radio was picked up by Lucas who whispered, "she's still in the middle room Owens showed us on the plans. The third room on the fifth corridor. There are four agents all armed outside of her door and three what looks like soldiers in the inside. There's three doctors in there with her too."

Mike gulped anxiously and grabbed the radio off Hopper, not even caring at the look of disapproval he got. "Lucas, how does she look? Is she okay?" he asked weakly, his nerves shooting straight back up to the surface.

"I think she's asleep Mike," Lucas replied while Kali muttered darkly, "or more likely sedated..."

Hopper grabbed the radio back from Mike, "you know what to do, run as much interference from that control room as possible. We're counting on you guys."

"You've got it Chief," Max called through the radio before it went back to static. Hopper lowered the radio, hooking it back into his belt before raising his weapon and nodded at the group to follow.

Mike glanced at Kali, noticing how her nose was bleeding a little heavier now and her skin looked more pallid. "Are you okay?" he couldn't help but ask quietly as they moved further down the corridor, keeping their backs to the wall.

"No. Are you?" Kali asked sharply making Mike exhale a deep breath.

"No. But I'm going to be when we get El out of this hell hole."

Kali smiled slightly and nodded, "something else we agree on."

They continued on, Will looking around nervously, staying close to Joyce's side, while Mike pulled his bullet proof vest tighter, wanting to get into the thick of things to get to El and wishing he had something to protect himself with.

He knew they had arrived at their destination when they crept through one more hallway and found the agents Lucas had mentioned stood in front of a set of frosted double doors, a keypad entry on the wall.

Mike gulped, his heart jumping out of his chest, knowing El was so close he could practically feel her presence. Kali stepped forward as the team watched her in awe, the agents who had been stood almost bored in front of the doors suddenly standing tall as if something had peaked their interest. They all began moving towards the corridor that the team had just vacated, bemused expressions on their faces.

The frosted glass doors opened and a soldier with a stern looking face stepped out, his eyes serious but confused as he watched the agents walking happily away from their post. "Where are you going?" he called to them, his voice deep and booming.

"Our shift is over!" one of the agents called. "In fact, I think I'm going

to leave this lab and never come back. I never liked it anyway."

"Yeah screw Brenner!" another agent cheered, pulling off his tie.

The soldier was joined by his colleagues, their own perplexed faces becoming something more serene as they walked through the frosted glass doors, dropping their weapons. "I never liked this job," one of the soldiers admitted as he followed the agents.

"Yeah I always hated it." Another soldier agreed as he stepped away from the door. "In fact, I think I'm going to report this lab."

Hopper beckoned to the group and they hurried through the frosted glass doors. Mike didn't notice how Kali faltered, both her nostrils streaming with blood, dark shadows under her eyes as she collapsed against the door frame, Will hurried over to her, ready to use his healing powers to make her own mind powers last longer. Joyce followed him while Hopper and Mike rushed into the main area of the room.

His amber eyes went immediately to El where she lay in a hospital gown on a bed, her wrists tied to the metal bars and her body being pumped with drugs from a beeping machine. "El!" Mike cried as he rushed over to her, not even flinching as the doctors gasped and shouted for help, all three of them being knocked out within seconds by Hopper and Funshine.

Mike hurried to El's side, his eyes darting over her desperately, first checking she was breathing before his chest tightened at how pale she was. "Hopper help me!" Mike pleaded as he began to untangle El from the machines. The Chief appeared at his side within seconds with Joyce, both of them carefully pulling out El's cannula's and hurrying to stop the blood flow that attempted to pour out before they could bandage the wounds.

"El can you hear me?!" Mike sobbed as he shook his girlfriend's shoulders gently while Joyce tried to comfort him, and Hopper removed the last of the syringes. Mike's heart pounded frantically and he couldn't help the cry of relief when Will rushed over, Kali suitably healed as he attempted to help El.

Mike moved out of the way but got to work untying El's wrists from the metal bars, his own hands shaking from shock and adrenaline while Will moved his warm palms over El's injuries. "I can heal her wounds Mike but she's still going to be sedated," he said through chattering teeth, his own surge of adrenaline coursing through his veins.

"I'll carry her," Mike answered immediately. "Just heal her Will. *Please.*"

"Chief? Chief do you copy?" Owens voice called frantically in the room as Hopper hurried to grab the radio.

"Yes, I copy Owens."

"We kept Brenner secure as long as possible in his office, but Frazier, some of the others, they shot at the door and they've got him out. They're coming straight for you all! I repeat, they're coming."

Hopper's jaw set and he pulled the radio up to his mouth, "and we're ready for those sons of bitches. Over and out."

He stashed the radio away and looked around at his comrades. "Wheeler, Will, take El and get out of here, get back to Nancy."

"We're not leaving you all!" Will argued as he finished healing El's wounds, Mike hurrying back to her side as he pushed down the metal side of the bed and carefully scooted El's body towards his chest.

"Honey go," Joyce said soothingly but sternly to her youngest son. "Go to Jonathan, Nancy and Steve, we'll be right out."

"Help Wheeler with El and get out *now*!" Hopper shouted to Will who looked at his mother, watching her nod at him assuring before he hurried to Mike's side, helping him pull El into his arms. Tears fell down Mike's cheeks as he held his girlfriend securely, one hand under her legs and the other gripping her back, her weight feeling as light as a feather compared to the adrenaline that was feeding his strength. The call to take El to safety was stronger than anything else.

They were just about to leave when a few bullets were shot into the room making them all shout as they ducked for cover. "Shit!" Hopper

grimaced as one bullet skimmed his shoulder. He hurried over to El's hospital bed, kicking it on its side. "Get behind that now!" he called to Will and Mike holding El. They did as they were told, hurrying behind the side turned bed carefully lying El down, who stirred slightly at the noise. Mike watched her for a moment, his heart choking him, hoping she was going to wake up, but also not wanting her to witness what was likely to take place.

El lay in between Will and Mike, the two best friends crouching down and staring at each other with wide terrified eyes. Kali who was now standing again, grabbed her gun, hate in her eyes as she loaded up. She backed away from the frosted doors which quickly closed, forming a momentary barrier between the group and Brenner's team.

Hopper looked up at the cameras which had turned onto him, Joyce, Kali and Funshine and mouthed a thanks to Team 2 who were trying to give them some more time. In that same moment the fire alarms started to go off in what Mike was sure was a desperate attempt from the control room to get the rest of the staff out of the building. Only those truly indebted to Brenner staying behind.

Bullets were shot at the doors, the reinforced glass baring the force until multiple bullets showered over the entrance, the glass splintering, cracking into every corner before it exploded into a million pieces.

"Get back!" Hopper shouted to the team, moving further away from the doors and kicking over equipment to hide behind with Joyce, Kali and Funshine.

Kali inhaled sharply and closed her eyes, ready to use her powers until Hopper's large palm rested on her shoulder. She opened her eyes sharply and looked at him. "No," he told her firmly. "I need you to keep your strength for getting us all out of this hell hole."

Kali nodded, her jaw tight as she raised her gun just in time for more bullets to make it through the now destroyed doors. She started to shoot, beginning a line of fire that Hopper, Funshine and Joyce joined in on. Will and Mike sank lower behind the bed, Mike reaching for El's hand, squeezing it gently. He blinked in surprise when her soft fingers gripped his hand in response and looked down

to see her eyelids flickering.

Sounds were coming back and to, like a wave moving towards the shore. El could hear noises, hurried voices and loud bangs that were pulling her out of unconsciousness. One voice in particular was bringing her closer to the surface more than any other.

El could hear the concern in his voice, the panic and fear directed at her, willing her to wake up. *Mike*, her thoughts whispered to her, a beacon of hope starting to fill her heart.

Her body no longer ached, her wounds healed while her head still felt sluggish from the lingering sedation. But at the sound of gun fire, the quickened breaths that seemed to be coming from either side of her and the shouts of rage, El knew she had to wake up.

She had no idea what was going to face her when she did wake up, but all she knew was that Mike was there. And no matter how dangerous the situation might be, she had to be with him.

El's eyelashes fluttered, strokes of flashing lights creeping through as her senses returned more quickly, the bangs of firing weapons becoming louder and more pronounced. Her vision was blurry as her surroundings started to swim into focus. She blinked slowly, her gaze carefully lifting over a set of long legs which were bent so that the person could crouch down. El's eyes moved up the body of the person, her heart already aware who it was as her pulse quickened.

She realised that he was holding her hand the moment he squeezed it gently, either in an act of comforting her, or comforting himself, she wasn't sure. Goosebumps raised up her arm from his touch and El couldn't help but squeeze back as she blinked, clearing the last of her confusion and looking up at the dark amber eyes that held her full whole heart.

"Mike," El gasped, her voice dry and croaky, but full of heavy emotion as warm tears sprang to her eyes. She hadn't been sure if she would ever see him again, but here he was, shock, relief and love seeping into his beautiful features as he stared back at her, his eyes wide and his lips slightly parted.

Mike didn't say anything, choosing action instead as he immediately pulled El into his arms, her hands clutching at the back of his jacket as she buried her face into his chest and sobbed. "Shh it's okay," Mike croaked out, his lips brushing against El's temple as she cried against him, inhaling his homely scent and wanting to engulf herself in him, never wanting to leave the safety of his arms holding her so tightly it was as if the world would end if he ever let go.

"I've got you." Mike sniffled, tears escaping down his sharp cheekbones as he only pulled El closer, concaving his body around her as if hoping to shield her.

The solace and serene peace El's heart had felt at being reunited with Mike was interrupted like a vinyl scratching when the sounds of loud gun fire and the shouts of agents came rushing back. El lifted her head, only for Mike to move his palm to the back of her neck as he tried to make her duck down once more, not wanting her to witness the battle that was taking place. El was stronger though as she looked up in shock, her wide hazel eyes taking in the bodies of agents, the remaining team, including Brenner who was being shielded by Frazier and two others. But the people who stunned El the most were Hopper, Joyce, Funshine and Kali.

"Kali?" El whispered, unsure of what she was seeing as she watched her sister shooting her gun, a burning rage in her eyes as she finally sought her revenge.

"She came for you El," Mike said in a croaky voice as his girlfriend slowly turned her gaze back onto him, her eyes dancing with unspoken questions. "We all did."

El's gaze finally fell on Will by her side, giving her a supportive smile before she looked more intently at Hopper, the man she had thought was out to hurt her, but only wanted to protect her. To Funshine, a part of her own personal family, one of the gang who had never judged her and tried to see reason. Joyce, who had taken El in, no questions asked. Treating her like a daughter and being the mother El had never had. And then Kali. Kali who pushed her to the extreme, Kali who she had lied to, Kali who she had thought was lost forever. All of them here, fighting for the cause and fighting for her. El's eyes fell onto a rapidly darkening patch on Hopper's shoulder and the way

Funshine was grimacing as he shot his gun with one hand and clutched his rapidly bleeding knee with the other.

No, El couldn't stand for them being hurt. No more people that she loved would be affected by the lab or Brenner. *No more.*

Feeling the strength around her, El slowly pulled away from Mike's chest, her eyes focused on Brenner cowering behind his agents as she carefully rose to her feet.

"El *stop!*" Mike pleaded, reaching for her, his eyes wild and terrified.

She held out her hand towards him, her powers stopping him from trying to pull her to safety. Mike's chest was heaving with his panicked breaths as he looked between his girlfriend and the agents who had turned their attention onto her.

"Don't shoot her!" Brenner called over the chaos, the room lighting up again and again with the repeated gun fires. "We need Eleven, Eight and the Byers boy unharmed!"

El's eyes narrowed in concentration, her senses on high alert as Connie Frazier ignored Brenner's orders and clicked her gun. The bullet moved almost in slow motion, Mike's cries of despair beside El only beginning, but before the bullet could reach his love, its destination was changed and hurtled back at Frazier. El watched the shock flicker into the monstrous woman's eyes before the bullet made its impact and Brenner's top agent crumbled to the floor.

Two more agents met their end at the hands of Kali, the final one shot by Funshine after the man had tried shooting Joyce. The death and horror crashed over El like a wave and her hold on Mike faltered, giving him the chance to stumble to his feet and grab her hand, their fingers entwining tightly.

Brenner slowly rose from where he had been crouching on the ground, his cold eyes swarming over the room as he finally realised his last defence was gone. His staff either dead or having fled the building and the twisted organisation he had set up.

His gaze flickered over Will, Kali and then El, greed flashing across

his eyes as he appraised the powerful young people in front of him. A sickly-sweet smile flashed onto his pale face and El's exterior immediately hardened as she realised what he was doing.

"I always knew you were both so special," he said in his calm and yet haunting voice as he looked between El and Kali. "You were made for so much more than the mundane *real* world. My purpose was only to show you your *true* potential - "

"*Bullshit*," Kali snapped, her eyes narrowing and her body shaking with rage as she stood up from behind an overturned cart and moved across the room. "Your purpose was to rip us from our true families and use us as pawns."

"You are my daughters, I could never use you as pawns," Brenner said, almost sneering while El shook her head, her own anger building up.

"No. We are *not* your daughters."

"But we *are* sisters," Kali added, pausing next to El, both girls looking at each other, their eyes searching one another as the vulnerability that they both felt slipped to the surface. El's right hand found Kali's left hand and their fingers laced together, a stray tear falling from Kali's dark lashes as she swallowed anxiously. "I'm so sorry El."

El smiled softly, her eyes watering as she stared back at her sister with love. "I'm sorry too." Both girls took a deep breath, El squeezing both Mike and Kali's hands as she turned back to look at Brenner. He was angry, she could see it flickering away in his eyes like a growing flame.

"You really think the outside world will accept you for what you are?" Brenner asked, almost laughing as he shook his head.

"Of course it will," Mike spoke up, his jaw clenched with determination as both men glared at each other. "Because El and Kali aren't defined by their *gifts*. They are defined by the people that they are. They are *good* people. And you...well you are going to meet a sad and lonely end."

"You have no idea the powers they possess," Brenner whispered back, his voice malicious as his cold stare turned on El and Kali again, before lingering onto Will. "We *must* do research on their kind. We must harvest that power for the greater good."

"Like you did with Sara?" Hopper barked, taking a step forward, moving away from where Joyce stood, her own face filled with anger as she glared at Brenner. "You used and abused my little girl for her gifts and then when she couldn't give anymore, you killed her. *Didn't you?*" Hopper was shaking with rage and grief as he stared at the monster he had once trusted.

Brenner contemplated the Chief for a moment, his lips poised, and his chin lifted slightly as he replied almost bored, "it was with regret that we lost Sara. She would have been *excellent* for our programme."

"You son of a bitch," Hopper hissed as he raised his weapon, his eyes steely as he stared at Brenner, his gun aimed at his head. For once the doctor looked nervous as his gaze flickered immediately to Kali and El.

"Girls, you wouldn't let him kill me. Your *own* papa. You are strong because of *me*, you are who you *are* because of me."

El shook her head while Mike squeezed her hand, reminding her that not only was her sister stood by her side, but the man she loved. The boy who accepted her for what she was, and only saw the beauty and the good in her. El's gaze moved to Mike, to find he was already looking at her, pride and determination burning away in his intoxicating eyes as he nodded his head.

El turned to Brenner, who had once been the only father she had ever known. Her hazel eyes then moved to Hopper, the man she had known for only a short amount of time, but a man she *trusted*, a man who stood up for the ones he loved. The man seeking revenge for the daughter he had lost at the hands of Brenner.

"You are right," El said simply as she spoke to her papa, startling the whole room with her words. "I *am* strong because of you. You put me and Kali through so much, you have made us stronger because now we will do anything for our freedom and we will work hard to have

the life you tried to take from us. But I am the person I am because of *me* not you. You will never have my heart, my powers or my mind."

Brenner looked taken aback while Mike couldn't help the flicker of a smile, his pride evident.

El took a profound breath, exhaling deeply as she looked at Brenner one last time. "But you were wrong when you thought we wouldn't let Hopper kill you."

Within the space of a few seconds El nodded her head at the grief stricken Chief, squeezed Kali and Mike's hands and looked just in time to see the shock flash in Brenner's face before one single bullet was shot into his head, ending not only his life but closing the sickening experiments on innocent children. No one else would suffer again because of him and at last as El and Kali looked at one another, closure and acceptance seemed to connect them both.

Mike's heart was in his throat as he looked around at the bloodbath around them, the monster now slain and the princess free from the chains that had bound her for so many years. He couldn't help but feel his stomach twisting with the death that surrounded them, but his heart was full, fit to bursting with pride and love for his brave princess.

Mike felt his hand being tugged and before he knew what was happening he was being pulled into a tight embrace with not only El, but with Kali, Will, Joyce and then hesitantly Hopper and Funshine. They all held onto each other, adrenaline making them shake with what they had experienced together.

There was hurried footsteps and they all pulled away, Hopper grabbing his weapon along with Joyce, Kali and Funshine while Mike tugged El to his side, his heart hammering as they waited for their attackers.

But attackers never came. Running towards them was Dustin, Lucas, Max and Dr Owens, all unscathed but looking just as shell shocked by the events they had no doubt witnessed on the cameras.

"El!" Max called in relief, her voice thick with emotion as she almost ploughed into her best friend, hugging her fiercely while Mike shouted for her to be careful. In that moment sense seemed to rush back to the Paladin and he looked at his girlfriend stuck in only a hospital gown. He felt like the worst boyfriend in the world as he hurried to pulled off his jacket and cover El in it. She gave him a warm thankful smile as she buried her nose in his warm jacket and his heart fluttered madly, smiling at her with soft eyes. *Wow. She is incredible.*

"Dude that was insane!" Dustin shouted, his face slacked with awe.

"It was crazy," Lucas mumbled, wide eyed as he looked around the room.

"It was necessary," Kali added with a deep exhale, as if the world's weight simply slipped away.

Hopper looked around at the bodies and rubbed at his stubble with his large palm. "Shit this is going to take some explaining..."

While they all talked and hugged, Mike wordlessly took El's hand and pulled her away slightly from the chaos. She didn't question him, simply followed until he stopped by the corner of the room.

Mike took a shaky breath as he took El's other hand, entwining their fingers and squeezing gently as he slowly looked up into his girlfriend's eyes. "Are you okay?" he whispered, his heart pounding.

El's gaze danced over his face eagerly, as if she would never get enough, which caused a blush to creep into Mike's cheeks and a soft smile to curve onto El's lips. "I am now," she sighed heavily.

Her hands pulled on Mike's tugging him a step closer, so that their bodies brushed together, their warmth being shared. El looked deep into Mike's eyes while he found himself staring back, captivated by her beauty and strength, and more thankful than he could ever explain to have her back at his side. "I love you so much," El gasped, a stray tear slipping down her cheek.

Mike released one of his hands from El's hold so that he could gently

wipe away her tear with his thumb before carefully caressing her cheek and cupping her jaw. "I love you too El. More than *anything*, and I..." Mike took a wavering breath and tried again, his chest tight with emotion. "I can't lose you again."

El smiled gently, her eyes glistening and warm as she looked up at Mike with adoration. She shook her head slowly, "you won't lose me," she said softly.

Mike swallowed anxiously, his heart skipping a beat as he stared at the love of his life. "Do you promise?"

El's hand mimicked Mike's as she carefully brushed away a stray tear he hadn't even realised he had shed. Her hand stayed on his cold cheek, warming him from the tips of his toes to the depths of his soul.

"Promise."

In one swift move Mike tilted El's head up and he bent down, their lips pressing together, fireworks bursting in their hearts as they were reunited. Mike kept one hand rested on El's jaw while his other hand moved to her waist pulling her closer. El hummed in contentment, her palm placing itself over Mike's racing heart as their lips cherished every delicate brush of the soft skin, once again feeling the bliss of being connected.

"Alright break it up," Hopper called, clapping his hands together and making Mike and El come to an abrupt stop, their cheeks flushed as they turned to find their friends not knowing whether to smile at the couple being caught in the middle of such a private moment or to be sombre considering the situation they were still in.

"We need to get you all back to the cars. Owens, Harrington and I will have to stay here to await the authorities." Hopper explained calling them all to order. No one argued with him, exhaustion mixing with the adrenaline still racing through their veins making them all oddly delirious.

Joyce came fussing over to El, worrying that she had no shoes on and would catch a cold. "It's okay, I'll carry her to the car." Mike insisted,

ignoring the snort of indignation from Max and Dustin who doubted his strength.

"You can?" El asked in surprise making Mike smile slightly.

"Of course I can," he said, not admitting it was more of a struggle than he expected as he scooped El into his arms, ignoring Lucas who mumbled that he didn't *have* to carry El through the whole *building*, only outside.

It was all worth it when Mike was walking down the corridor, muscles shaking slightly as El turned to smile at him, love in her eyes as she whispered, "this is like a Disney movie. You're like Prince Eric but better."

Mike grinned, feeling foolish and bashful that El could even compare him to a Disney prince. He didn't feel like a hero. But if he was El's hero, then that was all that mattered. "And you're like Princess Leia," he commented with a smirk, "but more badass."

It was with an ache in his muscles and a slight beading of sweat on his forehead when Mike carefully helped El into the back of Jonathan's car after a reunion with a very relieved and pale Nancy. Mike scooted in next to El, Will on his other side and Jonathan and Nancy in the front.

El looked out of the window for a moment, her eyes on the lab before they slowly pulled away from the building for the last time. Mike's eyes were on his girlfriend, attentive and so in love he felt like the butterflies in his stomach were joined by a flock of hummingbirds.

El turned to Mike, her eyes exhausted, relieved and happy. She carefully shuffled closer to him, his arm going around her shoulders as she rested her head in the crook of his neck. He turned his head slightly, pressing a delicate kiss to her hair line before resting his cheek in her curls. "You're safe," he whispered, closing his eyes as a wave of exhaustion washed over his body.

El's arms wrapped around Mike's torso and she snuggled in closer to him, closing her eyes and humming softly. "Home."

AN: I'm not even joking when I say I have been chipping away at this chapter for a month! I am honestly so happy that Mike and El are finally reunited :-)

We've got three chapters and an epilogue left to go, and I can promise you all a lot of love and happiness to come for our dearest Mileven!

I really hope you enjoyed this chapter, pretty please let me know what you thought! I need your feedback like oxygen :-D

17. Beautiful and Free

Part of Your World

AN: It's just been over 2 weeks since the last update so that's an improvement right guys?...Guys?!

This chapter is dedicated to some very special ladies who are simply the best cheerleaders of this story and have helped me through the worst case of writer's block and self-confidence issues.

Megan - My soul sister! I hope this makes you smile today because you deserve it :-) Thank you for letting me talk through this chapter with you!

Ronnie - My sweet princess! Thank you for the most encouraging DM's and for calling me 'Queen' because that makes me laugh and grin like a fool haha

Lee - My ballerina! Thank you for the British laughs and the words of wisdom and support :-)

Cali - My motivator! Thank you for being there from the very beginning of FangirlingStrangerThings and making sure to send those 'update' reviews haha

Robs - My birthday twin! And Ivy Wheeler's if any of you have read *The Life You Deserve* ;-) (It was our birthday on Saturday you guys) I hope you had the best day and enjoy this chapter!

Chapter 17: Beautiful and Free

16th February 1992

The hours since leaving the lab seemed to pass in a blur. The car journey back to Chicago was vaguely a memory, El and Mike both having spent the time wrapped up in each other, sleeping soundly for the first time in days.

And even when they all eventually arrived at the Byers house, the

young couple didn't leave each other's sides, tucking into the corner of the couch, their fingers tightly entwined.

El blinked blearily feeling overwhelmed as Joyce tried to mother her, Max asked her questions and Kali continued to discuss where they could possibly go now that the warehouse was no longer an option. The only peace El felt was when Mike would gently squeeze her hand, a soothing and reassuring gesture that he was there for her and they would get through all of this together.

"I don't know where we will go next," Kali mumbled to Funshine, her face tense with concern. "Our home is gone now."

"You can stay here," Joyce immediately offered, standing up to refresh everyone's coffee mugs. Her eyes flickered over Kali, Funshine and then onto El. She gave the youngest girl a warm smile, "you all can. I know it will be crowded, but I can't have any of you out on the streets."

There was silence for a moment, El too tired and shaken from the day's events to respond while Kali and Funshine exchanged hesitant glances. Eventually they looked to Joyce who stood patiently and Kali nodded her head, "thank you," she whispered as her dark eyes softened.

"You are welcome," Joyce said with a relieved sigh before her attention fell once again onto El who was crowded by the party, all of them sat around her and checking up on her with worried expressions every few minutes. "El sweetie, why don't you have something to eat?"

"No I think she needs sleep," Max commented appraising her best friend with a frown.

"She probably wants a shower," Kali added crossing her arms and staring at her sister.

"I think she probably just wants some peace and quiet," Mike mumbled quietly, giving El's hand another squeeze as she slowly looked up at him with a grateful smile.

"Well she's not going to be able to get that here," Dustin exclaimed, throwing an apologetic smile to Joyce who waved him off casually.

"No you're right," she frowned before looking at her youngest son. "Maybe she could take a nap in your bed?"

"That's fine with me," Will nodded, sipping at his glass of water from where he sat in front of the fireplace, the warmth of the ambers easing his aching muscles.

"To be honest...I think El probably wants some quiet time, somewhere else," Nancy spoke up from where she was sat at the table with Jonathan.

The whole room turned to look at her and she blushed slightly averting her eyes. "Not that there's anything wrong with us all being here, it's just...well I'm sure El is tired and overstimulated and just wants a quiet area."

"That sounds nice," El couldn't help but mumble, smiling weakly at Nancy who gave her a warm look in return. She loved all of the people surrounding her in the small living room, but she would be lying if she didn't just want some time to process things. Life *had* changed in the last day, and it was going to be different now for the rest of her life. Her mind felt like it was swimming in an ocean of new possibilities, and she needed some solace to understand it all.

"Where would you want to go?" Mike asked softly as El turned to look at him. A smile curved her lips as she stared into his amber eyes and felt her chest loosen with worry, knowing that her boyfriend was by her side gave her more comfort than she could explain.

The answer to Mike's question was simple for El. There was only one place she had felt truly relaxed. "Your dorm. With you," she said confidently while Lucas and Dustin exchanged a look, a slight smirk playing on their faces.

Mike chose to ignore the glances his friends were giving him and continued to gaze at El instead, nodding his head slowly and smiling tenderly. "We can do that."

"And I'll stay here," Dustin piped up before turning to look at Joyce. "If that's okay?"

"Of course Dustin," the mother replied as she patted the young man on his shoulder. She sighed and looked back at El, "well I think that is probably a good idea sweetie. Why don't you come upstairs and we'll get you some clothes to take with you."

El nodded in agreement, thankful to be out of the hospital attire and be able to get into her own clothing and get her identity back. She didn't argue when Max hurried to her feet and said she would come upstairs too; El knew her best friend had missed her just as much as she had. She reached for Max's hand as they ascended the stairs and gave it a gentle squeeze of reassurance. She was going to be okay now, they all were.

Mike started to gather his things, Will handed him a spare duffle bag as he went around folding his jackets and repacking some of El's stuff that he had taken from the warehouse for her, like her soft toy of Flounder from *The Little Mermaid*.

"You think she's gonna be okay?" Will asked as he handed Mike El's hairbrush to pack. The Paladin looked up at his best friend considering his words for a moment before smiling slightly.

"Yeah...I think she will. She just needs some time. These past few days have just been...crazy," Mike exhaled as he ran a hand through his hair.

"I get it," Will agreed sighing in relief that the ordeal was over.

Mike bit his lower lip for a moment, hesitation in his eyes before he looked back up at Will. "Hey, um, thank you for healing her. I know it probably took a lot out of you and I feel kind of bad that I didn't give you much choice..."

Will laughed in surprise, an amused grin on his lips as he shook his head at Mike. "I didn't do it for you, I did it because I care about her too. She's like the sister I always wanted, and she's one of us now Mike. You know I'd do anything for any of you."

Mike smiled in relief and acceptance as he nodded his head and took a step closer to his best friend, both boys hugging for a moment, gratitude and brotherly affection being shared between them before they pulled apart and carried on packing.

Just as they were about to leave Dustin came bombarding into the bedroom with Lucas, an animated expression on his face and an almost knowing grin on his lips. He looked straight at Mike when he spoke, "okay, so I *know* what you're gonna say, *but* you and El are going to be alone in the dorm room tonight and I'm just letting you know that you're covered for protection if anything happens - "

"*Dustin!*" Will shouted in exasperation.

"*What?!*" Mike said in the same moment, his face a mixture of frustration at his friend's ill timing and embarrassment over what he thought was going to happen between Mike and El purely because they would finally be alone.

"Look you two have been dating for a while and you might not think anything is going to happen and you're gonna die a virgin, but I think differently. So I've put a stash of condoms in your bedside table," Dustin said wisely, crossing his arms and then smirking. "You're welcome."

Mike felt heat creeping up his neck and he shook slightly in anger. "You really think I'm going to try sleeping with El after *everything* she's been through these past few days?! She needs sleep a-and relaxation, not...*you know!*"

Lucas sighed heavily and interjected before an argument could be started. "Dude, take it as a compliment that Dustin cares enough to make sure you and El are protected *if* you two do have sex in the future. And Dustin, I'm sure El isn't going to want to do that either, she's just gonna want some sleep man."

Dustin pinched the bridge of his nose and huffed in exasperation before looking back at the boys, "mark my words, those two are going to get it on. They almost lost each other, they could have *died*. If that doesn't fuel their fire I don't - "

"DUSTIN!"

"Seriously Dustin just stop," Will cringed shaking his head, while Mike tried to control his temper, his face almost as red as a tomato.

"I appreciate you wanting me and El to be protected," he said through clenched teeth, trying desperately to see where his friend was coming from. "But I can assure you that isn't going to happen tonight."

"Whatever you say," Dustin sighed, "just know I've got your back."

Mike rolled his eyes but exhaled a heavy breath realising he was too exhausted to even try and argue with Dustin. "Thanks man," he mumbled instead, picking up the duffle bag and heading out of the room with the boys following.

The gentle vibration of the car kept El relaxed and sleepy from where she rested her head against Mike's shoulder while Jonathan drove them to the University of Chicago campus.

"Do you wanna sleep first or eat?" Mike whispered to El, the combination of his soothing voice and his fingers carefully stroking through strands of her hair, making her eyelids heavy.

El pondered on her answer for a moment, feeling her heavy body aching for energy. But nothing was more prominent than the stench of iodine that seemed to linger on her skin and for a moment it took her right back to that horrific place. A shudder rippled through her skin before she mumbled, "shower. Shower first."

Mike said nothing, understanding her thought process as he leaned down and pressed a soft and lingering kiss to her forehead.

The rest of the car journey was spent in silence, Jonathan concentrating on the now busy roads and Mike and El simply taking in the quiet moment together, just two kids in love, *finally* reunited after such a turbulent time.

Jonathan pulled up on the kerb twenty minutes later and turned in his seat to look at Mike and El who were both stretching and sitting back up. "Are you going to be okay from here?"

"Yeah," Mike said in a slightly husky voice as he wiped at his eyes and then reached for El's hand. "It's a five minute walk, and we could probably do with some fresh air."

Jonathan nodded but still looked concerned, as his eyes lingered around the college campus. "Okay...well I'll watch you both until you're safely in the building."

Mike would usually have argued that there was no need, but after the events of the last few days he didn't question Jonathan's overprotective nature. "Thanks man," he said giving his sister's fiancé a grateful smile.

"Thank you Jonathan," El added in a whisper, a shy but thankful smile lingering on her pink lips.

"You're both welcome, now get some *rest*," he told them wisely, his gaze landing on El who nodded in agreement. Her fingers tightened around Mike's and she allowed him to gently pull her out of the car with him.

Mike hoisted the duffle bag over his shoulder and the couple waved to Jonathan before heading in the direction of the dormitory building which stood tall against the more traditional grey stone department buildings.

El's hazel eyes flickered around the campus as she walked hand in hand with Mike, her anxiety lowering as the location calmed down her racing heart. The college campus had become a sentimental place to El, the location where she would meet Mike, nerves and excitement always rife in her blood and butterflies fluttering in her stomach. A small smile lifted El's lips as they carried on towards the dormitory, a sense of relief she could only relate to that feeling of *home* filling her heart.

When they reached the building, climbed the stairs and entered Mike and Dustin's dorm room, El couldn't help but smile as she looked around at the familiar setting. Dustin's typically messy corner of the room, with candy wrappers and toys pouring out from underneath the bed. A sharp contrast to Mike's side of the room with his inviting bed, warm blue comforter, small dinosaur Rory on the bedside table

and movie posters displayed on the wall. It took El back to the first moment she had entered Mike's room in January after he had found her in the rain and invited her back to eat and drink something warm. He had always been considerate and caring even from the beginning.

Mike put the duffle bag at the bottom of his bed and then turned to El, a mixture of concern, nerves and love swimming in the depths of his amber eyes. "Are you sure you want to shower and not just sleep?"

El shook her head, "no definitely a shower first. And then maybe some food?"

"Eggs?" Mike answered in a soft voice, unable to stop from smiling when El's eyes lit up at the prospect of her favourite food. She nodded eagerly and Mike laughed gently, leaning forward to brush his lips against El's forehead. She closed her eyes for a moment, just breathing in his scent and warmth before he slowly pulled away.

El moved into the small bathroom, quietly undressing from the jeans and brushed cotton sweater she had changed into at the Byers house, carefully folding the clothing and putting them to the side. Her focus switched to the shower, not stepping into the narrow cubicle until the temperature was right. She had been cold enough the last few days, all she needed in her life right now was warmth.

The steamy spray washed over El and she closed her eyes feeling her hair dampen until her curls loosened and fell more delicately against her wet shoulders. She heaved a deep sigh as she ran her fingers against her scalp pushing her hair out of her face when she opened her eyes and slowly gazed down at her naked body.

El couldn't help the way she flinched when she saw the bruising on her wrists and ankles from where she had fought against her binds, or the small grazes from where canulas had been forced into her veins. Her slightly shaky fingers went to her neck where she knew there was small bruises from the incisions of needles. Her eyelashes fluttered closed and a thousand memories of the lab rushed through her mind; the cold, the pain, the experiments, the icy stare of Brenner, the look on his face as his life was ended.

El sniffled as she allowed the warm water to wash away the childhood innocent grief that rose to the surface and poured out of her body in the form of tears. She hated Brenner but she had once *loved* him. For eighteen years he had been her papa and while she tried to pretend his death didn't affect her, it did.

The moment El went into the bathroom and closed the door, Mike sat down on the edge of his bed, his hands fidgeting together on his bouncing knee as he watched the bathroom door intensely. His heart was squeezing with anxiety, hoping that El was okay and that she felt safe. He knew she had been through the worst ordeal and in time, when she was ready they would talk about it. But for now, he just wanted to be there for her, in whatever capacity she needed him.

Mike slowly stood up and started to pace the room. Now that he was alone he allowed himself to truly feel the weight of what losing El had done to him. He knew this was going to cause a separation anxiety that would only get better with time.

He came to an abrupt halt when he heard El gasp and sniffle, Mike's heart suddenly pounded heavily as he walked cautiously towards the bathroom door. He swallowed anxiously and carefully knocked on the white wood, his voice as calm as he could make it. "El? Are...are you okay?"

She was silent for a moment as if trying to hold in her heavy breathing before her beautiful voice echoed from the bathroom in a slight stutter, "y-yes. I just...I just need a few minutes."

Mike nodded even though El couldn't see and slowly turned his back on the door, allowing his tired body to lean against the wood and slowly slide down to the floor. He sat against the door closing his eyes and listening to the water running. "I'm here for you," he said quietly, not even sure if El had heard him or not, but not moving from where he sat, his heart heavy. "I'm always here for you..."

A little while later Mike heard the water turn off and the slide of the curtain as El left the shower. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply, not allowing the idea of his beautiful girlfriend being naked in the next room to affect him. This *definitely* wasn't the time.

"Mike?" El called quietly, her voice vulnerable and unsure.

Mike stumbled to his feet, "yeah El?" he asked quickly, already going through a mental list in his mind as to what she might need.

"Can you just come in here for a moment?"

"S-Sure," Mike gulped as his hand went to the door handle, carefully turning it as steam escaped the bathroom.

El was stood next to the shower, a white towel wrapped around her body, water droplets still falling onto her shoulders from her darkened wet hair that was already starting to curl elegantly.

She was looking at him, her hazel eyes wide and wet, filled with a complexity of emotions, Mike understanding each one of them because he understood *her*. He saw the raw feelings that conflicted her and before he could think of doing anything else, he stepped forward and opened up his arms which she immediately crumbled into.

The tears were silent and heavy as they fell onto Mike's sweater and he buried his face into El's shoulder as he concaved his much taller body around hers, protecting her and giving her the strength she so desperately called for.

Mike didn't know how long he held her for, his lips brushing soft kisses against her bare shoulder as she shook against him, getting it all out. All the years of pain, the anger of once loving Brenner, the grief of losing him, the guilt of not caring about another life lost. Because Brenner had destroyed her and she had rebuilt. And the girl who slowly lifted her head from her boyfriend's chest and met his caring eyes as he slowly caught her gaze, was a woman. A strong and beautiful woman, with a past that was now firmly in the *past*. It didn't define her and it didn't change the beauty that was born inside of her and blossomed like a rose. *She was free.*

El's palms moved up to Mike's face, her thumbs caressing over his sharp cheekbones as she rose up on the tips of her toes and kissed him.

Mike's eyes closed slowly as he chased her kiss, his heart fluttering whilst his hands found her waist and he leaned down, not once allowing his lips to leave hers.

And for a while that was how they stayed, as close as they could, their arms around one another as they exchanged soft kisses, each one delicate, taking their time because they *could*. There was no interruptions, no one to break them from this moment...until El's stomach rumbled with hunger and they both grinned in amusement against each others lips, their eyes sparkling with happiness.

"Eggo time?" Mike couldn't help but tease, his stomach swooping with exhilaration when El giggled and nodded her head.

While Mike pulled the whole box of Eggos out of the freezer and started to toast the waffles, El rummaged through the duffle bag and smiled softly to herself when she found the pink fluffy pyjamas she had hidden for so long from Kali. But as her eyes flickered to the grey sweat pants and blue sweater that Mike had given her the first time she came to his dorm, she couldn't stop herself from wearing them instead.

El was towel drying her hair when Mike returned to the bedroom balancing the tallest plate of Eggos she had ever seen. Her eyes widened in delight and she threw the towel into the laundry basket before hurrying to sit on Mike's bed.

"I thought you might be hungry," her boyfriend smiled softly as he sat down next to her and carefully put the plate on her lap. El nodded eagerly and grabbed the first Eggo, thankful it wasn't so hot that she couldn't hold it.

Mike's amber eyes flickered over her outfit and his cheeks blushed as a pleased smile lifted his lips. It felt like a lifetime ago that Mike had handed El those clothes, both of them soaked from the rain where they had sat under a tree and finally spoke to each other honestly for the first time. Mike had never expected the things that El had told him, but he would never change her character, she was perfect to him.

"Listen, I'm gonna have a quick shower and then maybe we can watch a movie?" Mike said softly as he reached for El's free hand and gently rubbed his thumb over her knuckles.

She watched him slowly for a moment, chewing her Eggo waffle and swallowing before looking up into his eyes. "Don't be long?"

Mike nodded and smiled in understanding because he didn't want to be parted from her either. He leant in, kissing her sweet lips in promise before leaving her to her Eggos while having the quickest shower of his life. It definitely felt good to get the last traces of the lab off his skin.

He changed in the bathroom into a pair of black sweats and a blue t-shirt and towel dried his hair the best he could, sighing in frustration when it was still a messy mop of black locks no matter how he tried to tame it.

The bedroom was filled with shadows when Mike walked back in, his eyes going to the window for a moment as he realised that the sun was soon escaping into the horizon. El had finished her Eggos and was lying on his bed under the blue comforter, her head resting on his pillow and a relieved look in her eyes when Mike walked over to her.

"Hey," he whispered breathlessly, reaching over to turn on the lamp and giving the room a warm glow before he perched on the end of his bed and moved his warm palm to El's blanket covered leg.

"Hi," she smiled in return, her voice as soft and homely as the room suddenly felt.

"You wanna get some sleep?" Mike asked El calmly, his eyes slowly dancing over her beautiful features looking for any signs of tiredness. "I can sleep in Dustin's bed and you -"

El laughed interrupting Mike, as she rolled her eyes playfully and shuffled closer to her boyfriend so there was space behind her on his bed. "I want you here with me of course," she told him with a small smile. "And I thought we were going to watch a movie?"

All Mike could do was grin, feeling elated and beyond thankful that she was back and they got to experience soft moments just like this. He bit his lip trying to contain his smile as he nodded in agreement and hurried to the duffle bag to pick out the movie he knew without a doubt El would want to watch.

He positioned the television set so it was facing the bed and pressed play, before hurrying back over to his girlfriend. El moved over a little further and pulled back the blue comforter as Mike lay down next to her. She tucked the blanket back around them, an almost smug grin on her face as she settled back down taking Mike's arm with her so that he was spooning her. He was thankful that the darkening room could just about hide his blush as he pulled El closer to his chest and settled on the pillow next to her.

El sighed happily as the opening credits to *The Little Mermaid* began playing and she turned her head, looking at Mike over her shoulder with a warm gaze. "Thank you," she whispered to him as he tightened his arm around her abdomen, clutching her as close as possible.

Mike didn't know how else to respond but close the short distance to El's lips and kiss her tenderly, allowing every delicate brush of her mouth against his to fill his body with love and hope for their future together.

"I love you," he whispered against her lips, feeling El's smile curve his own grin.

"I love you too," she breathed out happily, her hand finding his which lay on her stomach, entwining their fingers before they both turned their attention back onto the movie, slowly falling asleep safe and warm halfway through.

17th February 1992

It was the soft pattering of rain against the window that awoke El, her eyelashes fluttering with sleep as the dark bedroom only lit by the hue of the bedside lamp came into view.

The television screen was just showing static as *The Little Mermaid*

video had come to a stop hours earlier. El flicked her chin slightly and the tv turned off, the screen going to black.

El snuggled her cheek further into the warm pillow and smiled gently at the way Mike's deep breathing tickled her ear as the air moved delicately through her curls. His arm was still wrapped around her and she knew she could have instantly fallen back to sleep if her bladder wasn't screaming at her to use the bathroom.

With a quiet sigh El carefully extracted herself from Mike's hold, watching over him for a moment when he groaned slightly in his sleep, his brow furrowing before sleep pulled him back under.

El was as quiet as possible in the bathroom and tiptoed back into the bedroom, intent on going straight back to sleep when the view from the window distracted her. The sun was rising on a new day and the blazing orange glow beaming into a sky of indigo and pink was simply *beautiful*. El stayed by the window for a moment, marvelling at the sight.

As she stared at the sun rise the strangest feeling arose within her. This was the first time she ever felt like she wasn't being *watched*. A sense of calm washed over El and she smiled to herself feeling happy, feeling human.

She turned her gaze onto the person who had helped her make this dream into a reality. Mike was sleeping on his side, his arm still stretched out as if reaching for her and his mouth open wide as he breathed heavily. El bit her lower lip to suppress a giggle, because he was absolutely adorable, even when he was sleeping.

Her warm eyes flickered over his face; his *beautiful* face. Those sharp cheekbones, those plump red lips, his smooth pale skin, his bushy black eyebrows, his long eyelashes and the dazzlingly eyes that were currently hidden from her view. Her gaze followed down his strong neck and his t-shirt covered chest, the rest of his body covered by the blue comforter.

El felt her heart skip a beat as she continued to stare at him, her lips parting slightly in awe. He was truly beautiful, inside and out. Her fingers itched to touch him and a warmth was building inside of her

soul, a longing for him like she had never known before.

She moved to his side, carefully lowering herself back onto the bed and shuffling her body against his own, pulling the comforter over herself too. For a moment El just laid her head on the pillow and watched Mike, completely overwhelmed by having him so close and what that truly meant to her.

In his sleep Mike's arm found her and he pulled her closer, their foreheads touching and their noses bumping slightly as El once again tried to suppress a giggle, but this time a hum of laughter escaped.

Mike's eyes slowly opened, amber meeting hazel. He stared back at El, a heartbreaking smile appearing quickly on his perfect lips as he gazed lovingly at his girlfriend. "Hi," he whispered, his chest rising and falling with a content sigh.

"Hi," El grinned back reaching forward slightly to brush her nose against Mike's in an eskimo kiss that made his smile only widen.

"You have no idea how good it feels to wake up with you by my side," Mike said softly, shuffling closer so that their lips ghosted over one another.

El's heart raced as she stared at the man she loved, her gaze flickering with light. She reached up and cupped Mike's cheek, the tips of her fingers stroking across his skin, making him close his eyes as he sank into the feeling. His arm tightened around her, his warm palm on her lower back as they lay in silence for a moment, truly feeling their connection sizzling in the dark room.

El continued to watch Mike, to feel his skin under her fingertips as her heart thrummed and her stomach tightened with knots. Her teeth nibbled at the flesh of her bottom lip as she allowed the butterflies in her body to take flight and finally give into the calling of her soul.

"Mike?"

"Yeah El?" he replied sleepily, his eyes still closed as he leaned his cheek further into her warm palm.

El watched him for another moment, a playful smile playing on her

lips before she leaned in and captured Mike's mouth in a kiss. Her movement surprised him and his eyes opened for a second before closing once more.

His lips parted and they shared a breathy kiss, El humming in satisfaction as they grew closer, Mike's palm moving up her back before his fingers got lost in her curls. El's hand trailed down from his cheek, her fingers soft as they brushed down Mike's neck causing goosebumps to rise to his pale skin.

The heat building inside of El was moving down further, her breath becoming hitched as their kisses became needier, their tongues stroking together as they tasted one another. El couldn't help the moan that escaped her mouth and a shiver of excitement ran through her when Mike groaned in response, his fingers in her hair only tightening.

It was perfect but El wanted more. Her bare foot stroked up the leg of Mike's sweats before she lifted her leg and wrapped it around his hip, pushing their bodies flush to one another.

Mike gasped, pulling away from El's lips to look into her eyes. Their chests were rising and falling hard as they stared at one another through blown pupils. "El, we shouldn't - "

"No," El interrupted, shaking her head and pressing a finger to Mike's slightly swollen lips. "I want to."

She watched as Mike's Adam's apple bobbed nervously, his eyes desperately searching hers as he tried to find any doubt or hesitance. "You're sure?" he whispered breathlessly.

El couldn't help but smile softly, her heart warming with just how perfect he was. No Disney prince had anything on Michael Wheeler. Her fingers traced down from Mike's neck and stroked against his chest, El could have sworn she could hear his heart hammering under her palm.

"Yes," El whispered breathlessly, her eyes not leaving Mike's as her hand moved down to the hem of his t-shirt pulling the material up and caressing his abdomen, his muscles jumping at her touch. "I love

you," she said with warmth as she pressed a kiss to Mike's throat feeling him swallow nervously under her lips. "I want to be with you...in every way."

Mike's breath hitched and his hand moved to El's cheek, cupping her face and bring her lips to his own. "I love you too El, *so* much. And...I want to be with you too."

El smiled into their next kiss, their lips stroking, caressing and then devouring, moans and sighs of pleasure being whispered between them as El's hand moved to Mike's back pulling him down on top of her.

There was hitched breaths and nervous laughter as they slowly removed each other's clothes, El getting Mike's t-shirt stuck on his hair, both of them grinning foolishly as he helped her pull it off.

Their lips met again and again, each kiss as passionate as the next, their bodies warm and their eyes wide and awed filled as they removed the last pieces of clothes that separated them.

"You're so beautiful," Mike whispered, his lips parted slightly as he stared in disbelief at El, their hearts in their throats as hands started to explore, making each other sigh in pleasure, heavy eyes closing and opening in ecstasy.

There was whispered questions of "are you sure?", delicate responses of assurance before Mike hesitantly reached for the draw of the bedside table, inadvertently cursing Dustin in his mind for being right, and thanking him at the same time for his forward thinking.

El's bare chest rose and fell heavily as Mike positioned himself above her, their eyes meeting in excitement and nerves but above all *love*. They kept that gaze as they made love for the first time, El's hands flat on Mike's back, her fingers digging into his skin as they moved together, their breath mingled as they shared the all consuming feeling that boiled their blood and made their hearts race in unison.

"I love you," Mike said breathlessly, his warm forehead against El's, their eyes wide with wonder as they truly explored each other.

"And I love you," El choked, her heart just as overwhelmed as her body as she clutched onto Mike like he was her only life line. He leaned down, their lips meeting in a soft kiss, their feelings breaking the surface of their bodies, no going back, no need for pain, only love as they went to a world of their own.

AN: Thank you all so much for reading and coming along this journey with me. I appreciate each and every review, kudos and favourite. You can't even imagine how much they mean to me :) I can't believe we're getting so close to the end!

I first want to say before anyone says it; yes I know that the love making scene was vague but that is on purpose. This story is rated T and I wanted to stay true to the Mileven that I have created in this particular story. I know it was a super fluffy chapter but I am honestly happy with it and that has put a smile on my face :-)

I of course hope you did like it too! Please leave a review or drop me a DM at [fangirlingstrangerthings](#) on Instagram or tumblr. I will get better at responding I promise!

I love you guys!

FangirlingStrangerThings aka Siân ;-)

18. A Family and A Home

Part of Your World

AN: Hi everyone! I am yet again so sorry for taking a while to update this story. I am happy to say though that the current life distractions have actually been really good ones :-D

Now before I start this chapter, I want to take a moment to talk about Kali. If you haven't read Suspicious Minds then I would suggest skipping this bit and going straight to the chapter itself...

SPOILER FOR SUSPICIOUS MINDS

I think some people forget that El wasn't the only one to suffer at the hands of Brenner and the lab, but the book is truly heartbreaking, and not just to Terry but to Kali. For instance there is a moment right at the beginning of the book where five year old Kali is being moved into Hawkins lab and Brenner says to her, "we're home" and it actually says that for a moment her eyes lit up until Brenner reminded her this was a different home. Honestly I was crying! And then there are moments such as notes in Kali's file "she has stopped asking for her mother", god it just kills me!

But perhaps the most heartwarming moment is when Kali first sees El and says something along the lines of, "I will look after you baby Jane" YOU GUYS! I just love Kali and El's sisterhood and I want to protect it. Hopefully it has come across that Kali's anger stems from years of abuse and the need for revenge and that she loves El and was terrified of losing her.

Chapter 18: A Family And A Home

The light of the warm sun was dancing across Mike's face as he slowly opened his eyes, blinking slightly to get the sleep and bleariness out of his vision. It took a moment for the events of the night to come back to him as a blissful smile curved widely on his lips.

His amber eyes went to the incredible woman sleeping soundly next

to him and he marvelled in her beauty, their overheated bodies pressed together in a tight embrace. With the beam of the sun light on her skin highlighting her features she looked like an angel.

Mike exhaled a shaky breath trying to understand how all of this could possibly be real. How she could be sleeping next to him like this. Both of them closer than they ever had been before.

He carefully lifted his hand from her waist and moved his palm ever so carefully to her cheek, smiling to himself over how rosey it had become. His thumb brushed against her soft skin as his mind replayed the night before. The soft touches, the whispered caresses of love and the way it had made them both feel. It was addictive.

A gentle hum escaped El's lips and Mike watched her closely as her eyelashes fluttered and she slowly opened her own eyes, immediately staring back at her boyfriend and smiling so brightly it practically radiated off her.

"Good morning," El whispered in a happy sigh, her eyes widening as they danced across Mike's face, the same emotions of love and exhilaration so evident in her hazel eyes.

"Good morning," Mike choked back, clearing his throat but unable to stop the racing of his heart. They both lay there naked, their bodies covered by his comforter and yet it was the most comfortable he had ever felt.

El grinned and exhaled a shuddering breath, "last night was..."

"Amazing? Perfect? Absolutely everything?"

El giggled at Mike's rushed words and the sound of her gentle and warm laughter made him laugh too. His whole being feeling happier than ever before. She had done this to him and he would never get over the fact that he got to share this moment with her. There was no one else in the world he would ever want to have this with.

El scouted closer, their dewy skin brushing together as she leaned up slightly to kiss him. Mike's eyes immediately closed as he felt her luscious lips against his own and he smiled into the kiss. She went to

move back just as Mike's fingers laced into her hair bringing her back for another kiss, because one would never be enough. El giggled and grinned against his lips before her warm hand moved flatly against the expanse of Mike's back, making his skin erupt into goosebumps.

Their kiss turned from playful to passionate in a matter of seconds as the tension between them built up. El's uneven breaths and gasps were turning Mike crazy as he held her closer, his heart hammering against his rib cage as his whole body flushed with heat. He moved his lips to her neck, leaving open mouthed kisses, soft nibbles to her skin that made her sigh and gasp as she arched her back and pushed her body against his.

"I love you," El whispered against Mike's ear, her hot breath making his stomach clench but her words making his soul soar with happiness. This was really it. Everything he had always wanted, and who would have known he got to have that with *El*. The most incredible person he had ever met, his hero, the love of his life.

Mike pulled back slightly to look into the hazel eyes that captivated him. His smile widened, his eyes sparkling with the undeniable chemistry between them.

"I love you too El. *Forever*."

Their smiles widen before they were kissing again, getting completely lost in on another like nothing else mattered. Because nothing else *did* matter. It was them against the world.

"I think we should probably call Will's house, see if Hopper's back," Mike said to El from where they were both cuddled on his bed after a shower together which made his cheeks warm and a grin appear on his face when he thought about it. The warm water running on their bodies, the kisses, the touches.

El nodded her head from where it lay against Mike's chest, her ear pressed against his beating heart. Her arm tightened around his waist and she sighed, "I wish we could stay here forever."

Mike watched her for a moment, smiling softly as he stroked her

curls, his fingers playing with the strands. "I do too..." he couldn't help but whisper, his heart heavy for the moment. "But you know this is it now right? Nothing is going to keep me away from you."

El lifted her head, adjusting her position so that she could prop her chin on her crossed arms, the slight pressure on Mike's chest not even bothering him. Her grin was as happy as her sparkling eyes while she nodded her head eagerly.

Mike leaned forward to capture her mouth in a lingering kiss that had them both smiling ear to ear. They both exhaled breaths of relief and happiness, laughing in unison at how they were just two fools in love.

Eventually El sighed and went back to her original position of cuddling against Mike. She didn't say anything but he already knew this was her way of telling him it was okay to call the Byers house while she snuggled up to him, using his chest as a pillow.

Mike kept one arm around her securely and reached for the phone that sat on his bedside table. With difficulty he pressed down the buttons, dialling the phone number he knew off by heart. He lay his head back against the headboard, absentmindedly brushing his fingers up and down El's spine while holding the phone to his ear.

"Hello?" came the cautious voice of Joyce, Mike picturing her tense wondering if the ordeal really was over.

"Hi Mrs Byers it's Mike."

"Oh Mike, thank god." Joyce exhaled in relief. "How are you sweetie? How is El doing? Did she get a good sleep?"

Heat began to warm Mike's cheeks and he was thankful that El had her face turned away, resting soundly on him. "Y-Yeah she's doing good. She slept well...we both did..."

"Oh that's good news," Joyce smiled down the phone. "Hop, *Chief Hopper* is here, if you two wanted to come over so we can discuss a few things."

Mike's eyes lingered down to El for a moment and he nodded his

head even though Joyce couldn't see him. "Yeah we'll be there as soon as we can," he said quietly, his mind already wondering and worrying about what had taken place at the lab once they all left.

It was around an hour later when Mike and El eventually walked into the Byers house, being met by their friends and family, Max eyeing El suspiciously and Dustin throwing Mike a knowing grin that he pretended he didn't see.

"Glad you could join us," came the booming but teasing voice of Hopper from where he was sat in the armchair nursing a large mug of steaming coffee between his large palms.

"We needed rest," El stated slightly defensively while Mike's cheeks blushed and he averted the almost protective glare the Chief was giving him.

"Well now that you're back, I can fill you in on what's been going on," Hopper sighed, leaning back in the armchair and watching patiently as Mike and El took a seat next to Kali. The sisters smiled lovingly at one another and squeezed each other's hands in support. This was a big moment for them, the moment in which their lives could change dramatically.

"Where do I begin?" Hopper sighed rubbing at his tired and lined forehead.

"The beginning?" a teasing Steve piped up from where he stood in the doorway.

The Chief took a moment to glare pointedly at his partner before turning his attention onto Kali and El. They all listened carefully, on tender hooks as Hopper explained how the lab had been swarmed by police and FBI agents.

It turned out that Brenner was a wanted man, that his conspiring with top officials in government back in the sixties and seventies had caught up with him. Subjects had come forward with talks of LSD experiments, electroshock therapy and kidnap of children. It might not have been as convincing if old employees and security workers from the lab hadn't also joined the fight against Brenner and his loyal

following.

There would be an investigation of course and Kali tensed slightly when Hopper told the girls that they would be brought into answer some questions; their minds only eased when he assured them this was normal and they wouldn't be alone. Over thirty people involved in the experiments at the lab in some shape or form were coming in to give their part of the story.

"Oh course we won't mention your powers," Hopper hastened to add. "We will just say that you were both kidnapped and just like the other children, Brenner thought he saw potential and spent years testing you all for experiments that failed."

"So what happens next?" Kali asked later, her hand still in El's.

Hopper took a deep breath and looked at both girls. "Myself and Sam are already in the process of getting you both identifications and real paperwork. Even though I'm sure there are a lot of people that would love to see you stick around..." Hopper glanced at Mike and Joyce, smiling softly at her before turning his attention back to the girls. "But really, this is about your lives and it is finally *your* choice. No one else's."

El turned to Mike who was at her left side and gave him a warm smile, her choice already made about what home she chose. She blinked and turned to her sister, unable to understand the far off look in Kali's eyes as she stared ahead at the fireplace.

"Well you know you are all welcome here," Joyce said breathlessly smiling around at the room of people without a care of where they would all sleep. Her chocolate brown eyes landed on Hopper and she smirked, "even you Hop."

The Chief blushed and cleared his throat, a mumbled "thanks Joyce," leaving his lips while Will and Jonathan exchanged amused glances.

The heavy and tense mood in the room was quickly dissipating and being replaced with a warm and light energy, laughter and smiles being shared as the large group all ate Chinese take out food, Mike grinning like a fool as he showed El how to use the chopsticks and

Dustin stealing Steve's fortune cookie.

El watched Kali growing more quiet as she played with her food before eventually excusing herself and heading out into the back yard.

A soft sigh escaped El's lips before she turned to Mike and caught his attention almost immediately. "I'm going to go and speak to Kali," she said quietly not wanting to draw more people's attention.

Mike's amber eyes flickered to the back yard as he nodded, an understanding smile lifting his lips before he leaned in and gave El a gentle kiss that made her heart flutter. She beamed back at him, unable to hide the love and happiness that shone out of her like a beacon.

As El made her way towards the kitchen that held the backdoor, she heard Dustin say to Mike, "so...did you guys?"

"Shut up Dustin," Mike mumbled in response, knocking his friend's shoulder while El suppressed her smile and headed towards her sister.

Kali was sat on the edge of the small rickety porch steps her arms wrapped around her legs which she had brought up to her chest. El walked slowly over to her, neither of the girls saying anything as she carefully lowered herself onto the damp wood, adopting a similar position to her sister.

They were both quiet for a while, watching a few birds rustling in one of the trees at the end of the yard. It was mesmerizing, the way the few budding leaves moved in the cold but gentle breeze and the sound of whooshing feathered wings flapping as the birds tried to find their preferred perch.

"What are you thinking?" El asked quietly, her hazel eyes still on the tree and how it was regenerating ready for spring.

Kali was silent for a moment, a million thoughts and emotions rushing through her, all of them as determined as the next to reach

the surface. A heavy and almost painful sigh escaped her chest, as if her reservations were starting to leave her tired body.

"I know you want to stay here. With these people...but I don't think I want to stay here. In Chicago I mean."

El blinked and turned to look at her sister, her heart squeezing uncomfortably at the thought of losing Kali. "Where would you want to go?" she asked breathlessly.

A small smile started to curve on Kali's lips and her eyes sparkled as she continued to stare at the birds. "*Everywhere*," she whispered, an excited and yet apprehensive thrill in her voice. "I want to explore, I want to see the world. I want to see the ocean again...like when I was a child.

El's brow furrowed for a moment as she watched Kali. Her heart picked up pace moving slowly to her throat as a realisation hit her. "You remember life before the lab?" She knew it was a silly question, she had always known that Kali had a life before Hawkins lab but they had never discussed it before. It was almost dangerous territory. Or at least it *had* been.

The small smile remained on Kali's lips but her eyes grew sad as she slowly nodded her head. "I remember my parents...not their faces but their presence. I remember the smell of my mother, it was so comforting, it was safety. And my father's laughter when he would throw me in the air. I remember laughing so much, and I'm glad I did. I didn't realise that would be the last time..."

"Oh Kali," El gulped reaching for her sister's hand and squeezing it tightly. Kali responded and heaved a shuddering breath, a tear slipping down her cheek.

"Brenner told me they were gone. I stopped crying for them, I had to adapt to my isolation and just learn to survive. But now...now I wonder if he was lying. He lied about your mother, why not mine too? Maybe she is out there, my father too."

"Maybe," El smiled softly, support so evident in her voice as she stared at her sister hoping against hope that she was right.

Kali sighed and wiped at her wet cheeks before finally turning to look at El. "And what will you do?"

"I want to stay here. With Mike and the others," she answered honestly before a worried frown danced across her face. "And I want you to explore and live your life, but Kali...how do I get through this without you? You have been there for me since...since the beginning."

Kali smiled and leaned forward to push a strand of El's hair behind her ear, making them both grin as they remembered the lighter days in the lab, the days in the playroom, braiding each other's hair, playing pretend and colouring together. They made the most out of the worst situation, Kali had always wanted to protect her and keep her from the darkness of the only home El had ever known.

Kali leaned back and smiled, "you are the strongest person I know Elev - *El*," she said correcting herself quickly as both girls grinned. "You will always have me, if I'm not a phone call away just find me in the void. And you know I will visit, I love you, you're my sister and *nothing* will change that. I'm just sorry I didn't realise that sooner. I'm sorry you felt like you had to keep Mike a secret."

"I'm sorry too," El gasped, warm tears rimming at her bottom lashes. "Maybe if I had opened up to you sooner about how I felt so *trapped* then maybe you would have understood."

Kali smiled softly and shook her head, "I would probably not have listened, you know how stubborn I am." Both girls laughed gently, their eyes wet and bright. "But I mean this, Mike *is* a very good man El. You deserve someone like that. You know he will always be there for you too, no matter what you ask of him."

"I know," El breathed, her heart pounding in her chest and her cheeks still damp from tears. "I love him and he loves me. But he doesn't replace you Kali. Mike has his own place in my heart and so do you. There was never a competition."

Kali nodded, solemn for a moment from the shame of her previous actions. "You are right," she admitted squeezing El's hand again. "And I know he would give you the world if you asked for it El."

"I just want a world where you are all there. To be surrounded by my favourite people sounds like the best kind of world to me," El said softly, her lips twitching with happiness.

Kali laughed gently and shook her head in amusement, "that sounds like something out of one of your cheesy Disney movies..."

"You know about those?!"

"El..." Kali said pointedly, "you really are terrible at hiding things."

Both girls stared at each other for a moment, El marvelling at this new information before she laughed, a warm vibration of happiness leaving her chest as Kali grinned too, their eyes happy and free of worry, like they should have always been. They watched as the birds made one more rustle of their wings before setting off into the vast sky together, their wings wide and beautiful before separating, finding their own way in the world that was so open for them.

The living room was slowly starting to fill with shadows when Joyce turned on the lamps, bathing the area in warm yellow light as she watched 'the party' all squished around the old dining room table, playing a game of D&D which Dustin had insisted would make them all feel better.

It was with a look of bemusement that Joyce's eyes lingered over Kali and Funshine looking incredibly confused by the game as they sat squished in with the rest of the group, Nancy blushed while Mike and Lucas teased her about the times she would dress up for their campaigns as a princess, and El, well El looked at peace. A wide grin on her face as she held Mike's hand and looked around at the adopted family she had made for herself, each one of them willing to defend her to the end.

"So why doesn't my character just save your ass from the dungeon?" Steve asked in exasperation to Dustin who was pulling his hair out with panic after rolling the dice and getting the punishment of being captured when the odds didn't turn in his favour.

"It's doesn't work like that," Dustin mumbled as his eyes flickered

quickly across the board.

Steve snorted, "Wheeler wrote it! Get him to save you,"

"That's not how it - "

"Oh you're just a bunch of nerds," Steve teased ruffling Dustin's hair before leaning forward in his chair and crossing his arms against the table. "My turn," he added with excitement in his eyes despite his earlier comment. Nancy and Jonathan smirked at each other, seeing the former 'King Steve' avidly participating in D&D definitely wouldn't be something he would have lived down back in high school.

"They all getting on okay?" Hopper asked quietly, bringing Joyce out of her moment as she blinked and looked behind her shoulder to where the Chief was stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed casually.

She couldn't help the skip of her heart or the wide smile that curved her lips. "You could say that," she answered softly, moving through to the kitchen and grinning to herself when he followed.

Joyce sat down at the kitchen table and sighed heavily, her eyes flickering up to watch Hopper pour them both a cup of coffee and join her, pushing his seat a little closer to hers.

"So," Hopper exhaled, an almost shy expression on his face as he slowly looked up at Joyce. "It appears that we've gained *a lot* of children..."

Joyce laughed, her voice warm and a thrill rushing through her heart. "It appears so. When did that happen exactly?" She couldn't help but tease in an almost flirty nature that had so easily flickered into her gaze.

Hopper leaned back in his chair, a smirk playing on his lips. "Hmm, maybe back in high school? I mean...it *could* have happened - "

"Jim!"

"What?" Hopper laughed, his booming chuckle making Joyce grin even wider. "You know it's true." The teasing of his words didn't

represent the almost knowing smile that flashed on his face, his eyes turning softer as he stared back at her.

"I really did miss you Joyce."

Their fingers inched towards each other, neither of them even sure when exactly they had gotten this close together.

"I missed you too," Joyce exhaled, her grin being replaced with a more meaningful expression of longing as their hands met. Hopper's rough skin brushing over her palm, sending a spark of electricity up her arm. Their eyes locked and their hearts truly beat again for the first time in a long time.

El lay in the darkness of the living room surrounded by the people she truly loved, her head resting on Mike's chest, his steady heart beat lulling her to sleep as she stared up at the white ceiling, her thoughts whirling around.

It had been a wonderful day, emotional of course, but it felt like she finally had everything settled in her life to be able to close the chapter on the most turbulent times and start a brand new chapter. A new page completely blank and clear, ready for the memories that she could make. It was thrilling and terrifying all at the same time as she thought about the possibilities that were now open to her.

"Are you okay?" Mike whispered, his fingers moving slowly and lovingly through her mass of curls, his touch so delicate.

El nodded against his chest and carefully shuffled around in the blanket they were sharing, trying to be quiet so as not to wake up the rest of the party all sleeping soundly in the packed room. She adjusted her position so was on her side, her elbow arched on the carpet and her cheek in her warm palm. Mike quickly mirrored her position and they shared a playful smile as they continued to stare at each other.

"What's happening in that beautiful mind of yours?" Mike mused, his voice so gentle that it only made El want to snuggle up closer to him and fall into a deep sleep in his arms.

"I was thinking about everything I want to do," El replied in a breathless whisper, her heart picking up speed as she slowly gulped down her anxiety. "There is so much I want to do Mike. I want...I want to go to school and learn, I want to go places with you, I want to watch every movie that you love and every Disney movie that has ever been made, I even want to meet your parents!"

Mike's raised his eyebrows at El's declaration and a warm smile appeared instantly on his lips. "You know we can arrange all of that right?"

"That's what scares me," El mumbled, her head dipping for a moment. "It is so..."

"Overwhelming?" Mike whispered as his fingers gently lifted El's chin, his eyes searching her face lovingly.

"Yes," she exhaled in a shaky breath "Overwhelming. I don't know how to make everything work and it scares me."

"That's okay," Mike smiled softly, his eyes filled with such understanding that it took El's breath away. "You don't need to know how to do everything, that what I'm here for. And Kali, and Joyce, Max, Nancy, the boys, hell even Hopper!"

Mike moved a little closer to El, his hand resting on her cheek before his thumb gently caressed her smooth skin. "I just want you to know that you're not alone in this El. I love you, we *all* do. And we're going to help you anyway we can." A teasing smirk played on Mike's lips for a moment, "even if it means watching Disney movies all day and introducing you to my parents. It would have happened eventually."

El couldn't stop the happy grin that rested so perfectly on her face as she stared back at Mike. He truly made her feel like every dream and everything she wanted to try could become a reality. He was her greatest strength and greatest weakness, but most importantly he was hers and she was his. Forever.

"I love you," El whispered as she stared back at Mike, her words never enough to truly be able to tell him how important he was to her.

He leaned in, his lips brushing softly against her own, the warmth and familiarity of his skin on hers sending shooting sparks straight to her heart. "I love you too," he grinned, their lips curving together as their arms pulled each other tighter, their foreheads resting delicately together as they started to fall asleep.

A feeling of home fluttered around El's body and she sighed happily. An emotion of *belonging* grew inside of her and within the blink of an eye she was hit by reality. The want to know more about life, to know more about *her* life.

"Mike?" she whispered softly.

"Yeah El?" he asked in a husky voice, tiredness dragging him under.

"I want to see mama."

AN: I know this was a lot shorter than the kind of stuff you get from me but it's because I'm wrapping everything up :-D There is **one** more chapter left and if you haven't guessed, El and Mike are off to Hawkins! But don't worry, I have a fluffy little epilogue planned :-D

In other news, I won two awards in the Stranger Things Awards on Instagram that 'awwmills' created for Best Series (The Life You Deserve) and Best One Shot (The Pizza Boy). If any of you voted or even nominated me in the first place, THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Writing means the world to me and it is something that I would love to take forward as a future career. I know I'm not a JK Rowling, but there is nothing we can't achieve if we don't work hard and have enough passion to get.

I love you all! Thank you so much for reading, and please leave a review or comment :-)

19. The Wheeler's and the Ives

Part of Your World

AN: Well here we have it ladies and gentleman. The FINAL chapter of Part of Your World. I may or may not be crying right now. I will leave my thank you for the ending AN. I haven't proof read yet, but I REALLY wanted to get this out to you guys, so please forgive me for any errors! I will edit it later. In the second to last section of the story there is a major spoiler about El's parentage. If you don't want to know about that, then please avoid that section.

I'm going to be crying at all you later because this baby is complete except for the epilogue. So for now, please enjoy this rollercoaster ride. I love you all!

Chapter 19: The Wheeler's and the Ives

Saturday February 22nd 1992

Trees and farm land rushed past the car window as El's hazel eyes took in every aspect of Indiana. The flat lands sparkled a bright white from the snow that had fallen over night, it lay untouched and perfect as the truck passed fields upon fields of white frosty glitter.

"Not long now," came Mike's gentle whisper from beside El who turned at his words, their eyes locking and a warm but nervous smile being shared between them.

It was a week since the events at the lab and El felt ready to put it behind her and *finally* move forward with her life. But before she could truly explore what her future may now bring, she felt a calling from Indiana, a need to not only meet Mike's family but to meet her own.

So on the first weekend after the trauma of the lab massacre, El, Mike, Will and Joyce piled into Hopper's truck and watched the scenery pass them by as he drove them back to where this had all started, *Hawkins*.

El knew this wasn't just a significant trip for her, but for Will and Joyce also. After the attempted kidnapping, Joyce had never allowed Will to go back to Hawkins, her fear over him being taken was too much for her to take any risks with her youngest son.

As they drove passed the "Welcome to Hawkins" sign, El couldn't help but let her gaze linger on Will, watching him as he took in the sights of his childhood, his eyes wide with all the differences of the small town and all of the similarities.

"Do you think it looks any different?" Mike asked his best friend, also watching his expression.

Will blinked, his face still one of stunned silence for a moment as he looked between the views of the small town and Mike and El. Eventually he shook his head, a slight smile curving on his lips. "No, it looks the same."

"I can't believe we're back," Joyce said from the front passenger seat, her voice slightly croaky as she spoke in a hushed tone.

It was obvious how overwhelmed she was and Hopper seemed to realise too, his hand reaching for her own, their fingers entwining as he gave her hand a encouraging squeeze. "Hey, it's going to be okay. The lab is gone, they can't hurt Will or El anymore."

Joyce exhaled a sharp but shaky breath she had been holding and nodded her head, looking at Hopper and smiling slightly despite her nerves. He grinned back at her, his eyes warm and more alive this last week than El had ever seen them. Seeing her guardians like this brought a smile to her own lips and then an almost amused glance with Mike and Will who had also noticed the exchange.

Hopper looked up at the rear view mirror to find the young adults all smirking at him, a deep blush creeping onto his stumbled cheeks as he cleared his throat and turned his gaze back onto the road.

"So the plan is to drop you two love birds off at the Wheeler house and we'll pick you up in the morning ready for the trip to Denfield." Hopper's eyes flickered back to the mirror, a slight frown creasing into his already lined forehead. "Are you still sure you want to go El?"

"Yes," El answered immediately, unable to keep the irritation out of her voice. She had been asked numerous times at this point whether she had changed her mind about visiting her mama and Aunt in Denfield. Even Joyce had been worried what seeing her mother in a catatonic state might do to her.

El couldn't honestly know how she would feel when she finally saw her mama, but all she knew within her heart and soul was that she *needed* to see her mother. She was calling to her, she needed to see El just as much as El needed to see her. Nothing was going to stop them from being reunited this time.

Hopper cleared his throat, "it's just when I reached out to Becky she was in shock El, I don't even know if she believes us.."

"She will," El muttered, her eyes determined as she looked out of the window and took in the sights of Hawkins. Her stomach clenched when a familiar looking building rose up, an illuminous sign proudly stating "*Benny's Burgers*".

Images of that stormy night whirled around her eyes, the flashes of lightning, the pouring rain, the frail bodies of her and Kali, tired, weak, hungry. The kind man taking them in, the loud bang as his life was ended.

"El what's wrong?" Mike's alarmed voice brought El out of her daze as she realised she had been hyperventilating, her heart racing and her chest rising and falling quickly as she looked between the building and Mike's wide concerned eyes.

Hopper hesitantly pulled the truck over to the side of the road, both he and Joyce immediately turning in their seats, their own gaze filled with anxiety and care for El. "What's wrong kid? Did you see something?"

El wiped the cold sweat from her forehead and took a deep shaky breath, her eyes still lingering on the restaurant as Mike finally understood.

"Benny," he whispered, his eyes filling with sympathy as he adjusted in his seat and put his arm around El in comfort. She shuddered a

sigh and lay her head on his chest, closing her eyes and feeling his steady heart beat. It kept her calm and eased her anxiety enough to speak.

"Benny...he...he was killed, trying to help me and Kali."

There was silence in the truck except for the audible gasp from Joyce. Hopper clenched his teeth, closing his eyes tightly as he processed the news that one of his best friends was killed at the hands of the lab. Another life taken, another person he would seek justice for.

"I knew it wasn't suicide..." Hopper muttered under his breath, shaking his head in disgust before he opened his eyes, the harshness in his gaze melting away as he looked at the vulnerable girl being held in Mike's arms.

"El I don't want you to worry about this okay? At least not this weekend..." he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Benny was my friend and I know he would have done anything to help you. I *promise* you, we will get justice for him."

El slowly nodded, her cheek still pressed to Mike's chest while he slowly stroked the curly locks of her hair. Hopper looked between the couple and sighed, trying to ease the slight tension in the car. "Now come on, chin up, you've got your in laws to meet and *trust me*, you're going to need all the strength you have to meet Karen and Ted Wheeler..."

Will and Joyce immediately laughed, Mike's cheeks turning red while El allowed herself to smile, taking a deep breath and remembering what this weekend was all about. *Family*.

The truck slowly pulled up in front of the Wheeler house and Mike looked up at his family home, a mixture of relief and nerves building up inside of him. He couldn't say that he had missed it or the facade that his parents hid their unhappy marriage behind. There was *one* reason that Mike came back to his family home as much as he could manage, and that was the blonde 12 year old currently jumping up and down impatiently at the window.

"It that...Holly?" El asked uncertainty from next to him, her hazel eyes squinting in an adorable manner as she tried to catch sight of the hyper preteen.

"Sure is," Mike chuckled as he squeezed El's hand and caught her attention once more. "You ready to meet my family?"

El smiled nervously but nodded her head, words failing her. Mike looked back to see Joyce, Hopper and Will all smirking at him.

"Have fun in there," Hopper teased.

"Yeah El, enjoy meeting your future in laws," Will joined in, nudging a blushing Mike in the side.

"Oh stop it you two," Joyce laughed, shaking her head in amused disapproval. She turned her gaze onto Mike, her smile a lot calmer than Will and the Chief. "Have a nice time with your family, and tell Karen I say hi," Joyce said before looking at El, "you're going to be fine honey. Enjoy it."

"Thank you Joyce," El responded, exhaling a steady breath.

"Yeah thanks Joyce," Mike sighed before glaring playfully at his best friend and the Chief of Police. "And you two can just go to hell."

Will burst out laughing, looking happier than he had in years while Hopper merely rolled his eyes stating, "you know I might be your father in law one day right?"

"Don't remind me," Mike mumbled sarcastically, but the lopsided grin that followed after showed they only teased in jest. It had been discussed over the week in depth about how El would feel having Hopper as her father figure. It hadn't been a very long discussion before she had agreed wholeheartedly. He had protected and cared for her behind the scenes, now he had stepped out of the shadows he wanted to continue that role. Giving them both the father daughter relationship they had been robbed of.

"Right get out of my truck you two. You don't want to keep Karen waiting any longer, she's probably stood right behind that front door waiting!"

It turned out that Hopper's remark wasn't far from the truth, because when Mike and El stepped up to the front door, hands tightly entwined, Mike's spare hand holding his key, the door was suddenly swung open. There in the beginning of the hallway stood his mom, of course wearing her best dress, her makeup and hair perfect and an award winning smile on her face.

It made Mike want to roll his eyes knowing that his mother was always one to put on a face for guests. This was Mrs Karen Wheeler, dotting wife and mother, active member of the garden club, book club and community council. This wasn't the mother he had seen drinking wine every night, the mother who seemed distracted by her own thoughts to understand what was going on with her children, and the woman who tried desperately to make a marriage work even when there was nothing left to fight for.

But here she stood looking like nothing could affect her or the perfect dinner she likely had planned. Her illusion was broken within seconds when whatever greeting she had decided to use when meeting El was cut short by Holly screaming, "Mike!", running past her mother and jumping straight into her brother's arms.

Mike felt the wind get knocked out of him as his little sister plowed into him, her arms wrapping around his neck as she buried her head into his shoulder.

"Jesus," Mike croaked as he wrapped his arms around Holly's waist and swung her slightly. "Stop growing will you!"

Holly laughed into Mike sweater and leaned her head back so they could get a good look at one another. "I'm not as tall as *you*. I told Tania in my class that you're like a giraffe now."

"Oh thanks," Mike chuckled carefully letting Holly down, completely forgetting for a moment that he wasn't just about to do something nerve wracking until his mom cleared her throat.

Mike blinked, realising El was still stood next to him looking awkwardly between Karen and Holly, while his mom looked frustrated that her greeting had been ruined.

Mike grabbed El's hand again, giving her an encouraging smile, warmth being shared between them in a gaze before he took a deep breath and turned to his mother and sister. "Mom, Holly, this is El."

Karen sighed in relief and stepped forward, extending her manicured hand out, "it's lovely to finally meet you El. Nancy has told me so much about you," she said with a smile, before glancing at her son in frustration that she hadn't heard the news from him.

"It's nice to meet you too Karen," El said politely, her smile strained as she tried to work through the evident nerves that were creeping up her throat.

El turned her attention onto Holly who was appraising her deep in thought. "I like your hair," the blonde blurted out, a smile curving her lips.

Mike grinned and turned to El who blushed slightly before smiling back at Holly, "thank you. I like yours, and your dress."

Holly looked down at her blue patterned dress and shrugged, "mom said I had to wear a dress because this is the first time Mike has ever brought a girlfriend home..."

"Mom," Mike muttered rolling his eyes in embarrassment.

"What?" Karen chuckled, a slight crack in her false image breaking down. "It's the truth isn't it? You've never brought a girl home before, this is a very special moment."

Mike looked to El who was watching him in her own amusement. Her eyes sparkled with humour and her smile made his heart race. He couldn't help the happy sigh that left his mouth or the quiet, "well she's a very special girl."

Unfortunately his words weren't quiet enough and he found himself turning crimson at the awws that followed his sentence from his mother and little sister.

"Oh god," Mike whined pressing the palm of his hand over his eyes. "I said that out loud didn't I?"

El's giggle danced around his body like magic. "Yes, you did."

"Ew Mike when did you go all cheesy?" Holly teased, her smile wider than Mike had ever seen it.

He rolled his eyes, "you'll understand one day."

"Well *I* have a boyfriend and I don't talk all - "

"Wait...you have a *boyfriend*?! Holly you're like six."

"I'm twelve."

"Not possible."

"Well you're like thirty!"

"I'm actually not though - "

"You *so are*!"

"I am *not* - "

"Children!" Karen called sharply, followed by a laugh that didn't hide her exasperation very well. "We have a guest. Can you both please act like the well behaved children that I raised?"

Holly shrugged and Mike cleared his throat looking down at his shoes. Karen sighed and looked at her daughter, "sweetie will you go and finish laying the table?"

"Fine," Holly grumbled walking towards the dining room like she was going to her execution.

"Michael why don't you give El a tour of the house? I need to check on the meatloaf," Karen suggested, wiping her hands on the crisp white frilly apron she wore that covered an even more pristine floral dress.

"Sure," Mike agreed feeling relieved at getting a bit of alone time with El. He frowned looking towards the living room which seemed quiet. "Where's dad?"

"Oh he's in work sweetie, he'll be home before dinner though."

"He's working on a Saturday?"

Karen shrugged, already moving towards the kitchen where the most divine smells were coming from. "He's doing an extra shift. He'll be here soon."

Mike didn't say anything, knowing he was fighting a losing battle by asking his mother how things were going between his parents. Instead he focused on the beautiful girl at his side.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked El, his eyes moving over her in concern, worried that his mother and sister had been too much for her.

El smiled, her beauty distracting Mike before he finally blinked and realised she was speaking. "I'm fine. They seem nice."

Mike couldn't help but sigh, "they are nice I guess. I mean my mom...well, she is great when you get to know her. She hides behind this mask you know?"

El laughed, the irony not lost on either of them as Mike grinned too. "I *do* know."

"So," Mike exhaled looked around the almost too clean hallway. "Are you ready for a tour?"

"Definitely," El smiled looking around, her eyes widened slightly as she took in her new surroundings, so different from any home she had experienced herself. She looked back down at the heavy winter coat she had on. "Where can I put this?"

"Oh yeah," Mike laughed begrudgingly releasing El's hand so that they could both get out of their thick jackets. "I'll take it for you," he added shrugging off his own and already reaching a hand for El's.

Time seemed to slow down completely as Mike watched El unzip her coat and push it off her shoulders. His amber eyes widened and his gaze slowly lingered over what he now realised she was wearing. El had on a light pink skater dress, the material flattering her slim waist while the skirt gracefully pushed out. She had accompanied the dress

with a cream cardigan and thick pantyhose.

Noticing Mike's stare, El looked up catching his eye. He didn't have the strength to look away, their gazes locking as heat crept up his neck. His stomach a bundle of butterflies because she was radiating beauty, and she was *his*, he was *hers* and he would never be able to get over that. He would never understand how he had become so lucky to not only have her in his life, but to be the one she turned to, the one she loved in return. It was the most powerful feeling Mike had ever experienced.

"You are *beautiful*," he whispered, his voice tight with emotion and awe.

El blushed, the rising of soft pink on her cheeks only making her more beautiful by the second. She sighed happily, her breath shaky as if she had been waiting for this moment, when he would see her like this. The moment when she got to be her true self.

They continued to look at one another as Mike pulled El closer by her hand, their chest brushing as he leaned down and she tilted her head up, their lips meeting in a slow and gentle kiss that seemed to light them up from the inside out.

"I love you," El whispered against Mike's lips, her beaming smile lifting up his own lips.

"And I love you," Mike responded breathlessly, his heart jumping with excitement.

El leaned back enough to look into Mike's eyes, a spark flickering between them both as a teasing smirk played on her beautiful features. "Are you ready now to give me the tour?"

Mike laughed, any thoughts of anything that wasn't El had completely left his mind. "Y-Yeah," he coughed awkwardly, grinning like the fool in love he was when El squeezed his hand and looked around the space with excitement, ready to find out about where her partner had grown up.

Despite Mike's grumble that there was "nothing exciting to see on the tour", El found herself taking in every aspect of the Wheeler home. From the matching furniture, to the adorable family photos that made Mike blush, to the pristine almost perfect way everything had been arranged. It was certainly different from how El had grown up and even though she would have been lucky to grow up in a house like this, she found herself much preferring Joyce's more lived in home.

"This is my old room," Mike said the moment they walked up to a large and almost bare bedroom. The walls were blue and a double bed dominated El's view before she noticed a desk and a few personal items.

"I took most of my stuff with me to college," Mike admitted following El's line of gaze.

After poking their heads around the door of Nancy's old bedroom, Mike took El into Holly's bedroom, laughing at how different it was since he had last seen it.

"Damn, I feel like she should have barbie dolls lying around her vanity table, not makeup!" Mike exclaimed, shaking his head.

"I do still have some barbie dolls actually," Holly commented from behind the couple, making them jump slightly.

"Are you following us?" Mike accused, pretending that he hadn't jumped in fright at his sister's voice appearing through the calming ambience he had made with El.

Holly blinked and glanced around the room before looking pointedly at her brother. "You do realise you're in *my* room?" With the flip of her blonde hair and the hand on her hip, she looked quite the sassy teenager.

Mike rolled his eyes while El giggled, her soft laugh making him instantly warm up. "I'm just giving El the tour. Your room is included in that Holls."

"Well my room *is* the best," Holly grinned before jumping onto her

bed and crossing her legs. She looked between Mike and El, her blue eyes focusing on her brother's girlfriend. "You can hang out in here with me if you want. No boys allowed though."

Mike opened his mouth to retort when El quickly cut in, "I would love to." He shut his mouth, the argument dying on his tongue as he turned to his girlfriend, wide eyed.

"You want to hang out with Holly?"

El's cheeks had heated once more and she shrugged, a nervous but almost playful smile on her lips. "Why not? It will be fun." Holly grinned in agreement, nodding her head avidly while Mike looked between both girls and sighed.

"Fine. I guess I could go talk to mom or something..."

"Yeah maybe she'll make *you* do the chores for once," Holly mumbled in annoyance while Mike rolled his eyes, hesitantly letting go of El's hand and watching as she joined Holly on her bed.

"Need a hand?" Mike asked his mom as he walked into the kitchen. Karen was carefully decorating what looked like a chocolate cream pie, the smell of the chocolate instantly making Mike's stomach growl with hunger. He had to admit it, he definitely missed his mom's cooking.

Karen looked up from her master piece and nodded, "you can slice some strawberries for me sweetheart."

Mike nodded, taking the chopping board she offered and knife. Karen looked behind him, frowning slightly. "Where is El?"

"Oh she's been currently occupied with Holly," Mike grinned as he moved to the fridge and took out the punnet of strawberries.

"Ah," Karen said with a smile, her gaze still on the dessert that she was perfecting. "She seems like a sweet girl Michael."

"She is," Mike agreed, unable to stop the grin from creeping onto his face at the mere mention of El. Just like his mother, he kept his head down and focused on his own task.

"How long have you two been dating?"

"Um, I mean I've known I've liked her since the beginning, but we've been officially dating since the 11th February."

"How did you two meet?" Karen asked curiously.

Mike felt a slight sweat bead at his forehead and he cleared his throat as the memory of El saving him from the mugger came to the front of his memory. He remembered the rush that had blasted through him like electricity when she had removed her mask and showed him the person underneath.

"We met on campus," Mike shrugged vaguely, hoping his mother wouldn't pry any further. For a moment he forgot this was *Karen Wheeler* he was talking about.

"But I didn't think El went to college?"

"No she - " Mike paused abruptly as he heard the gentle rumble of a car pull into the garage. He turned his gaze to the side door that adjoined the kitchen to the garage and exhaled a sharp breath out of his nostrils. With the sound of the car door closing and the approaching footsteps, Mike knew his dad was home.

An uncomfortable silence filled the kitchen even before Ted Wheeler opened the door and stepped into the space. Mike glanced at his father, noticing how he looked a little more stressed than usual but otherwise his normal self. The usual thick framed glasses on his lined face and the wisps of grey that streaked through his dark hair.

"Ah Michael," Ted greeted with a short nod of his head. "How are you son?"

Mike blinked, slightly taken aback at his father's immediate question. He wondered if the time apart from one another had done them some good. Mike knew his father wasn't as bad as the likes of Lonnie Byers. But Ted Wheeler had never been an active father like Mr Sinclair and definitely wouldn't have fought for justice over him like Hopper had for Sara, El and Kali.

"Yeah I'm good dad...um, how are you?"

"Same as usual," Ted replied already walking towards the living room where his La-Z-Boy would be waiting for him. He rubbed at his forehead as he grumbled, "same old work Michael."

Mike watched him go, a frustration building inside of him. He hadn't even *asked* about El. Had he forgotten she was coming?

Karen cleared her throat the moment her husband left the room and continued preparing the dessert, her perfectly shaped eyebrow arching in annoyance.

"Are you and dad fighting again?" Mike couldn't help but blurt out, his task of cutting strawberries long forgotten as he stared at his mom.

Karen sighed, refusing to meet his eye as she pulled the chopping board towards herself and continued with the job she had given to Mike. "Honey, we're fine. We've been married a *long* time. You will understand when you're our age..."

"I don't think so," Mike couldn't help but mutter under his breath, but if his mom heard him or not, she chose to ignore his words.

Mike understood that his relationship with El was relatively new in theory, but that didn't stop the gut feeling inside of him that told him she was the *one* person he was meant to always be with. And he knew that they would *never* end up unhappy in their relationship like his parents clearly had.

He slowly looked at his mother, a frown creasing on his forehead as he realised that she never would leave his father. The Karen Wheeler that Hawkins knew was the Karen Wheeler that she wanted to portray. She was so deep into her character that she seemed to have totally lost who she truly was.

Mike sighed, knowing he was fighting a losing battle. "You want any more help mom?"

"No that's okay sweetie, you go find El and make sure Holly isn't scaring her off."

"That's a good point," Mike couldn't help but admit, a ghost of a smile

twitching at his lips which seemed to be mimicked on his mother's face as she looked up at him, giving him a slight nod of encouragement to go.

Mike walked past the living room without even glancing, he knew after all where his father would be and what he would be doing. Why bore himself with the repetition of his father's life? As he climbed the stairs his eyes lingered on the well polished photo frames that he passed. There was so many photos with smiles that didn't reach the eyes of the person. Fake.

In that moment Mike found a stubborn promise building up inside of him. Whatever future he had with El, which he hoped would be forever, contain children, maybe a dog or two and later on grandchildren; would be filled with *real* smiles and *real* laughter. And he knew with every fibre of his being that he would do everything to make that dream become a reality.

He was brought out of his daze by the giggling and animated voices of El and Holly. Mike carefully stepped towards his little sister's room, not wanting to immediately alert the girls to his presence as he tried to listen in.

"I know you say your favourite is Ariel but *I* think you look like Belle."

"I do love Belle too," El responded avidly, causing an instant grin to widen onto Mike's cheeks. He leaned against the door frame, just noticing the girls sat on the bed, their legs crossed as they faced each other. Some of Holly's Disney Barbie dolls were scattered across the pink patchwork blanket as if his little sister had been showing them off, which no doubt she would have done.

"Who do you think I look like?" Holly asked, flipping back her long blonde hair.

El took a moment to reply as if she was seriously debating her answer. This was an important conversation to her and Mike felt his heart immediately melt. He sighed quietly, his stomach flipping with butterflies because his girlfriend was adorable and she was *his*.

"Maybe Aurora? Or Cinderella?"

"Well I do like to sleep," Holly giggled making El laugh too, the combined sound of his sister and girlfriend's laughter making Mike's breath stutter. "But mom *always* makes me do chores, so maybe I'm Cinderella," she concluded, shrugging her dainty shoulders.

"You can be both," El urged.

"I can?"

"Yes. You can be whoever you want to be," she said with a smile, only making Mike fall even more deeply in love with her.

"I like you El," Holly stated looking up at her new friend and grinning. "You're kind and pretty."

Mike couldn't see El's face as she dipped her head at Holly's words, but it was easy to imagine the blush that was surely creeping onto her cheeks right about now.

"I like you too Holly," El smiled, lifting her head back up to look at the young blonde. "You are very sweet and very beautiful."

Before Holly could respond, they heard their mother's voice from where she stood at the bottom of the stairs. "Dinner's ready!" she called in a sing song tone, going straight back to her hostess routine.

Mike couldn't move away before Holly looked up and spotted him leaning against the door frame of her room. She rolled her eyes with sass as she climbed off her bed, "we were having a private conversation!"

El turned her head to see who Holly was speaking to, a lopsided grin appearing on her beautiful face as Mike stared right back at her, his eyes softening because she was perfect and seeing her with Holly only made him love her more.

"I was just coming to call you for dinner," Mike said to Holly, eventually moving his eyes off El for a moment to lie to his sister before looking back at his girlfriend. "Are you okay? Holly didn't terrify you too much?"

"I did *not*!" Holly shouted while El laughed, getting off the bed and brushing down the material of her dress to make sure it was neat for dinner.

"No," El chuckled smiling in amusement as she walked up to Mike and took his waiting hand. "Holly is really sweet."

"See," Holly smirked, look extremely pleased with herself as she flounced out of her bedroom.

In the moment's peace and solace, Mike turned back to El and reaching for her other hand, their fingers entwining as he pulled her forward playfully. The smile and gentle laugh he got in return made his grin stretch so much it ached his cheeks.

"Did you really have fun with Holly?"

"Yes," El answered honestly with a nod of her head. "She is really funny!"

"I guess so," Mike snorted, shaking his head in lovable frustration. He thought about the reason he wanted to speak to El privately and sighed heavily. "My dad is here now..."

"He is?" El responded in surprise, her eyebrows lowering in confusion at the fact that he hadn't wanted to meet her before dinner.

"Yeah," Mike mumbled before clearing his throat. "I just um...well I want to apologise in advance about him. Because I don't know *how* he is going to act towards you, and you mean the world to me El and I swear to God if he's rude to you I - "

"Mike," El interrupted, with a small exasperated laugh. She released one of his hands and he immediately missed the connection until her palm cupped his warm cheek. Her thumb stroked across his cheek bone as Mike tried to swallow the lump in his throat as he stared deeply into the hazel eyes he adored.

"It's going to be okay. He can say what he wants, I don't care. You and I have been through more than some people will ever go through. He doesn't scare me."

"I don't think he'll *scare* you," Mike mumbled. "It's just..." he sighed in frustration, closing his eyes and allowing his cheek to nestle into El's soothing palm. "He's embarrassing. His lack of involvement is just shameful I guess..."

"Does his opinion mean that much to you?" El asked in surprise, her tone gentle as she listened closely to him.

Mike pondered her question for a moment, not finding it as something easy to answer until he had thought it through properly. "It used to," he finally admitted. "But I guess it really *doesn't* anymore. I just don't want to ever end up like him."

"And you *won't*," El immediately responded, her eyes determined and powerful as she stared right back at him. "I don't even have to meet him to know that, because I know *you*. You are the best person in the world Michael Wheeler."

Mike felt warmth spreading across his cheeks at El's words and his heart squeezed and tingled with the love he felt for her. He couldn't stop the grin that she brought to his lips or the way his stomach leapt at her words. But he couldn't let her win this. "Are you kidding me El? *You* are the best person in the world! You are kind, caring, smart, *beautiful*, a freaking superhero!"

El giggled, her happiness radiating through her in the most intoxicatingly wonderful way. She made Mike feel like he could fly, her love soared through him like nothing he had ever experienced before.

"You *are* the best person in the world Mike!" She conceded, still smiling so beautifully. "You are selfless, brave, wonderful, handsome and the most caring and loyal person I have ever come across."

"No, that's you."

"No *you*."

"Are we really doing this El?"

"If we have to!"

"Mike! El! Dinner!" Karen's now shrill voice rang up the stairs, making the couples freeze almost in fear before bursting out into laughter. Mike shook his head in amusement, reaching his hand out for El's.

"You ready to do this?"

El exhaled a deep breath, her shoulders rising and falling elegantly. She placed her hand in Mike's and smiled up at him, blinding him with her beauty once again. "Born ready."

Dinner with the Wheeler's was unlike anything El had experienced before. Mr Wheeler was exactly how Mike had described him and yet El couldn't help but be disappointed in his lack of involvement with his family. He would ask El a few questions here and there, such as where she had grown up.

"Chicago," she had said calmly, her quick shared glance with Mike not really embodying the impression of ease she was radiating. Inside she was worried of saying the wrong thing, concerned she would say *something* that would lead Mr and Mrs Wheeler on a path to finding out her true past.

But by the look of how Ted Wheeler ate his dinner, chewing slowly while his eyes glazed over as if he was a million miles away, El had the feeling he didn't have the will or the want to go snooping into her past.

Karen Wheeler was a little different. She liked asking El questions and she seemed to have the grace of someone who would remember every single detail, which only added to El's nerves. She tried steering the conversation away from herself and push it back onto Karen who seemed to thrive off compliments.

"This meatloaf is delicious Mrs Wheeler," El said kindly, not exactly lying as she marvelled at the spread of food that Mike's mother had laid out for them.

"Oh please call me Karen," she said in a twinkle of laughter, flicking her hand casually like the mountains of homemade food wasn't

something she had clearly spent all morning preparing. "Meatloaf is Michael's favourite."

Mike nodded in agreement, his mouth filled to the brim like he was a starved child having their first proper meal. El beamed at him, a warm smile lifting her cheeks. It was clear that no matter what relationship he had with his family, the college cafeteria meals couldn't compare to Karen Wheeler's.

And then there was Holly. And El immediately liked her. Her vivacious and energetic personality intrigued El and she found herself wanting to be around the young girl; she was amazed by how a normal twelve year old life was like. She knew it was something that she had missed out on, but being around Holly was almost healing. It made her realise it was okay to bring out that inner child and just have some *fun*.

The rest of the main course seemed to pass without any arguments, Holly happily chatting away about her extracurriculars and how she wanted to be a cheerleader while Mike grumbled that cheerleaders were the worst type of teenagers until Karen muttered, "*I was a cheerleader Michael...*" making her son's usually pale freckled cheeks heat up. El shared a grin with him, her heart aching with love for the man sat at her side, holding her hand under the table.

El didn't think she could eat anymore until Karen walked back into the dinning room, the most beautiful dessert El had ever seen proudly display on a glass stand, strawberries and icing sugar decorating the chocolate cream pie.

"Wow," El said in awe as Karen triumphantly placed the pie in the middle of the table and began to cut it into slices. "That is the most beautiful dessert I've ever seen," she added in a breathless whisper to the delight of Mrs Wheeler.

"*I cut the strawberries,*" Mike piped in while Karen tried not to roll her eyes and settled for an amused smile instead.

El turned to Mike trying to control her grin, "and you did an amazing job." She said in a wavering voice attempting not to laugh but Mike beat her to it, a chuckle of humour leaving his lips and making El's

heart leap with happiness.

Karen was piling up the empty plates with the help of Holly when she looked up at Mike and El, "I've set up Nancy's room for you El, if you need anything just let me know honey."

"Thank you," El said with a polite smile, her eyes darting to Mike who was rolling his eyes in exasperation. He had warned her that his mom would probably put them in separate bedrooms. He said his mother was a church goer, not that she always practised what she preached according to Mike.

"Don't worry," he whispered to El later on after they had said goodnight to Karen who was pouring herself a glass of wine. His hand brushed down El's arm leaving a trail of goose bumps behind before his fingers laced with her own. "We'll figure it out."

El gave it a good ten minutes after Karen had closed her bedroom door before pulling back the covers of Nancy's old bed and tiptoeing across the hallway to Mike's room.

She carefully opened the bedroom door with her powers, knowing it would be much easier and quieter than her trying to fiddle with the handle. El moved as quietly as she possibly could, a smile instantly on her lips when she found Mike was on his way *out* of his room, the look on his face making it obvious that he had the same plans as her.

"Hi," he said in less than a whisper, merely a breath.

"Hi," El replied almost as quietly as she moved towards her boyfriend and fell straight into his arms with a sigh of relief. She felt like she could sink straight into his chest, her head lay in the hollow of his neck and she breathed him in, her heart racing and her whole body losing all its anxiety at the feel of Mike's arms wrapping tightly around her.

El felt Mike's soft kiss against her temple and she smiled into his neck, feeling the goose bumps that her skin brushing against his skin raised to the surface of his body.

Mike exhaled a deep breath and El could hear the smile in his voice

as he whispered, "I've missed this."

She hummed in agreement, knowing that while they had spent the whole day together, moments like *this* had been few and far between. "Me too," El agreed softly, her breath tickling Mike's neck as he held her closer, never wanting to let go. And for a while they just stayed like that, completely wrapped up in each other, thankful for a moment of peace and quiet. A moment just for them when they could be truly vulnerable and tender with one another.

"Should we get into bed?" Mike asked after a while, his arms making no movement to leave their cuddle.

El leaned back slightly, tiredness hitting her as she realised how dark the room had become despite the warm glow of Mike's bedside lamp. She nodded in agreement, a small smile lifting her tired face.

Mike took her hand and led her to his bed, the blankets had been pushed back messily from where he had obviously jumped off the mattress the moment he also heard his mother go to sleep.

He climbed into the bed, pulling El along with him and after a bit of shuffling and adjusting of blankets they both rested their cheeks on the soft pillows, breathing in the fresh fabric conditioner as they faced one another on their sides.

Their eyes find each other easily and they smiled coyly, playfully. For a while there was only the quiet of the warm glowing room, the gentle breaths of their rising and falling chests and the locked gaze of amber and hazel eyes.

Mike's hand moved to El's waist, his palm moving across the curve of her stomach and her hip. His thumb brushed against the sliver of skin below her shirt, feeling her intake a stuttered breath. He continued to stare into her eyes, feeling all the emotions he felt for her mirrored in her beautiful orbs, sparkling in the light hue of the bedroom light.

Her hand moved to his cheek, her fingers brushed against his sharp jaw line while her thumb caressed soothing and mesmerising circles across his slightly stubbled skin, the slight scratch of his facial hair against the tip of her thumb intriguing her.

Mike felt himself smiling against her hand, unable to stop the overwhelming love he felt for her from pouring out into every fibre of his being. "I love you so much," he breathed out, his chest tight with emotion.

El's eyes widened and he knew she was smiling before he even allowed his gaze to linger down to her lips. "I love you too. *So much*," she whispered, her words leaving her in a gentle caress that tickled Mike's lips at her proximity.

He couldn't help but close the distance to kiss her, his lips pressing into hers, the soft sigh that escaped her mouth as they parted captured in his. They shared one breath as they melted into one another for a long time, breathless heaving chests and overwhelmed senses as they completely lost themselves to their love and passion.

Much later Mike lay in his bed, El tucked up against his chest, her arms around him while his fingers trailing slowly up and down her bare skin as he watched the stars that seemed to twinkle in the ink black sky.

"Mike?" El whispered, her cheek against his skin, her ear pressed to his heart.

"Yes?" he replied softly, turning his attention from the sky and down to look at his girlfriend. Her messy curly hair making him smile.

"How long have your parents been unhappy?"

Mike was startled slightly by the question but it wasn't *that* surprising. If he picked up on the tension between his parents it only made sense that El did too.

He frowned as he thought about his answer, searching the depths of his mind as he tried to remember when his parents unhappy marriage had become most apparent. Mike continued to trail linger touches up and down El's spine as he spoke.

"I think it started in the summer of 1985. Well, that's when I noticed anyway. Mom seemed to be out a lot more and her and dad spent less and less time together. I mean, they already didn't spend *that* much

time together. As you've seen tonight, my dad's favourite thing is the television set."

El sighed softly, the warmth of her breath making Mike's skin tingle. "It's sad," she whispered while he nodded slightly. After a moment's silence El lifted her head off Mike's chest and met his gaze, a small frown creasing her forehead.

"Promise me we will never end up like that."

Mike blinked almost in surprise at El's words before a smile curved his lips. He reached his hand out and stroked it through her curly waves, warmth filling his chest as he felt the wild hair between his fingers.

"I *promise* El. We won't *ever* end up like that. I love you too much and that will never fade away. It feels like..." Mike took a deep breath before continuing, his eyes softening as he stared at El's incredible hazel depths that showed him the perfect soul he had fallen so deeply for. "It feels like I can't love you anymore than I do. That it's not even *possible*. But then every single day it grows stronger."

"I feel the same way," El whispered breathlessly, her smile so beautiful that Mike's stomach erupted with butterflies. "I love you Mike."

"I love you too," he replied immediately, leaning forward to meet El's lips in a soft and yet meaningful lingering kiss. After a while they pulled away, smiling gently at one another, the tiredness obvious in their eyes.

"I guess we should get some sleep," Mike sighed, stroking El's smooth cheek. She nodded against his hand but her eyes dipped down, her eyelashes obscuring the look in her gaze.

Mike frowned and moved his fingers to her chin, very gently lifting her head until she hesitantly looked at him. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly, his words laced with care.

"I'm scared," El whispered, her voice heavy. "I'm scared to meet mama and Becky. I'm scared mama won't...that she won't know who I am."

"She will," Mike immediately interrupted, his tone serious as he looked into the depth of El's eyes willing her to believe him. "Maybe she won't be able to show it. We can't know that, but El, she *will* know who you are. She will feel it."

"I hope so," El's whispered her voice wavering as she slide her cheek back down to Mike's chest, her arm moving around his torso, clutching him tightly. He wrapped his arms around her, leaning down to press a tender kiss to her forehead.

"It's going to be okay," Mike whispered the words of love against El's skin, feeling her relaxing in his arms, her body taking a deep breath and slowly calming down. Mike continued to hold her, pressing the most gentlest of kisses to her skin, his lips ghosting over her forehead, his fingers moving softly through her hair.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered once more, already knowing she was asleep by the way her breaths had evened out and how her grip on him had loosened.

"I will be with you the whole time."

Sunday February 23rd 1992

El couldn't keep still during the ride to Denfield. Even with Mike's hand firmly in hers, she couldn't stop fidgeting. Her gaze going between the farmland that they passed, to Mike who gave her reassuring and confident smiles and then to fidgeting with a loose thread on her baby blue dress.

She tried to listen to Hopper explaining where the house was, Joyce's soothing words that it was all going to be okay and to Will who assured her that they would all be there with her. But their voices blurred and seemed to disappear as El tried to ease her anxiety and not panic. The only thing that seemed to tether her to Earth was Mike's fingers entwined with hers and the gentle brushing of his thumb against her knuckles.

"Here we are," Hopper said quietly, his usual grumble of a voice slightly nervous as the wheels of the truck crunched slightly over the

gravel drive that brought them to a small house, hidden perfectly away by trees and large hedges.

El's heart jumped into her throat as she stared at the house through the window, her lips parting slightly as she tried to ease her nerves. Adrenaline was building inside of her and she felt heat raising to her skin as a panic tried to ripple through her. But as she felt Mike squeeze her hand, she was one more grounded back down to Earth.

You can do this, her inner strength urged her. *Your mama is waiting for you.*

And she had been waiting a long time.

El startled slightly when the car door opened and it took her a moment to realise that Hopper was stood there, a look of support and protection battling across his rough features. "Come on kid," he told her, the rumble of his voice giving El comfort that she didn't quite understand yet. "We're all going to do this together."

El nodded, her whole body tense as she awkwardly got out of the truck, taking Hopper's offered hand while Mike held her left hand, not willing to let her go just yet. Joyce and Will had joined them and together they all turned to the house and walked slowly to the unknown, nerves rippling through the group. Because El *wasn't* alone. Not one of them knew what this was going to do to her and they all stood around her, like a protective guard, intent on keeping her safe but knowing they couldn't control what might happen.

El's heart raced the closer she got to the Ives home, every step taking her closer to where it had all began. To where her mother was. Her eyes flickered over the house, wondering if it had been her family's home for a long time. Her *family*. The word felt foreign and El had to pause, her body stopping her, giving her a moment to process what was about to happen. Because when that door opened it would never be closed again. El would find out about her true parentage, she would know where she was from, how she came into this crazy world. The biggest mysteries of her young life were about to be unlocked and to say she was overwhelmed was an understatement.

"Hey," Mike whispered gently from her left side. "I'm here, we're *all*

here."

"You can do this sweetie," Joyce said in a choked voice, her own emotions of the situation right on the surface.

"They're going to love you kid," Hopper said from El's right side and she hesitantly moved her gaze from the house and onto the only man who she had experienced *real* fatherly love from. She gave him a nervous smile before turning her attention to the front door.

El exhaled a deep breath, letting go of Mike's hand and stepping up the porch, facing the door that separated her from her mother and Aunt. Feeling the radiating strength behind her of the ones she loved, El felt courage rushing through her veins, in the blood that she shared with the people that lived in this home. She knocked, firmly and with assertion. She was ready.

It was only a matter of seconds before the door opened and a middle aged woman appeared. El's breath caught as she stared at her Aunt. Becky stared back at her, her hand gripping the door as if it was the only thing keeping her standing.

Their eyes flickered across one another's face, taking every feature in. El could distantly see herself in her Aunt. They had the same body frame, the same curl to their hair and an identical look of shock on both of their faces.

Becky's eyes were filling with tears as she stared astonished at her niece. She barely choked out one word before stepping forward and crushing El in the tightest embrace she had ever experienced.

"Jane," Becky sobbed. Her voice one of love, pain and relief.

"Terry was right," Becky cried, still clutching onto El who slowly allowed herself to crumble into the arms of her Aunt, tears rolling down her cheeks. "S-She *always* knew you were out there. She never gave up!"

"I can't believe this," Becky gasped, shaking her head against El's shoulder as she only clutched her closer as if never wanting to let go. "You're alive. You're here. Thank God. *Thank God.*"

El felt the tightness in her chest burst open, suppressed emotions bubbling to the surface as she cried in the arms of her Aunt Becky. *Her Aunt Becky. Her flesh and blood. Her family.*

She didn't know how long they embraced on the porch but neither Mike, Hopper, Joyce or Will interrupted them. All watching on, just as amazed. Hopper and Joyce held hands, giving one another strength. Will tried to breathe through the emotions that welled up in his eyes, while all Mike could do was rapidly blink, trying to avoid the tears that inevitably fell down his own cheeks. El had been lost, all these years she had been hidden away. But now she had found her place in the world. She was home.

El slowly pulled out of the embrace, her body shaking from the emotions that swirled within her. She wiped at her eyes and took an unsteady breath as she once again looked upon the face of her Aunt. Her heart was racing, her head dizzy and overwhelmed, but the words she spoke were filled with determination.

"I want to see mama."

El didn't take in the words that Becky spoke to her and the rest of the visitors. Everything else completely faded away, it was as if she had tunnel vision, almost not even needing her Aunt to lead the way. She knew where she was going.

Becky halted by the living room door and turned hesitantly to El. "Sweetie...I know that Chief Hopper has told you about your mom but it might still come as a surprise - "

El looked at her Aunt, saw the nerves and guilt that swirled within her chocolate brown eyes. She carefully reached out for Becky's hand, giving a gentle squeeze before taking a deep breath and stepping forward, Mike and the others staying by the door, giving her this moment that she needed to face alone.

Her feet barely made a noise against the carpet, not that the sound would have alerted Terry. El's heart was in her throat, her head felt like it was swimming in the roughest of waters. And yet despite how overwhelmed she felt, it was as if an invisible magnet pulled her

towards her mama. To the person who had brought her into this world. The person that had made her.

Terry came into view, her dark blonde hair pushed back into a hair tie, it looked dull as if it hadn't seen the sunlight for a long time. She was thin and looked so small from where she sat in the chair, her eyes, the same as Becky's stared unfocused at the television while her lips moved with unspoken words.

El could hear her pulse in her ears and the shot of adrenaline that sparked throughout her soul and body as she turned and faced her mother for the first time.

A tear slipped off El's lower lashes and fell down her cheek, slowly, containing the pain that she suddenly felt within her chest as her hazel eyes took in the state of her mother. What the lab had done to her, how they had diminished her light.

"Mama," El choked out, her voice so breathless it felt like she might faint with how light headed she felt.

She slowly closed the space between them, moving without even thinking about it as she knelt down in front of the chair. El stared at her mother, her lips parted in awe and amazement. Tears poured from her hazel eyes without her even realising as she slowly reached out her hand to her mother.

El was hesitant, worried she might somehow startle her mama. Slowly, so very slowly her trembling hand met her mother's face for the first time and El struggled to contain her emotion, gasping as fresh tears fell from her eyes, the cruelty of what had happened to her mother bubbling to the surface. But in that moment she couldn't feel anger. All she could feel was love. True unconditional love.

The love that she felt for her mother and the love that her mother felt for her. She couldn't explain, she didn't even know how it was possible, but El could *feel* Terry's love pouring out for her even if she couldn't show it.

Her trembling hand cupped her mama's face, a stuttered breath leaving El as she watched a tear fall down Terry's cheek. She wiped it

away tenderly with her thumb.

"Hi mama," El whispered, trying to swallow against the constriction in her throat. "It's me...Jane. I'm...I'm home."

El looked upon Terry's face, her eyes marvelling over her mother's beautiful features, knowing that trying to take everything in about her mama would never be enough. She would never get the relationship was she *meant* to have. They had been robbed of it and this was all that was left. El's eyes tried to bask in *everything* about the face of Terry Ives. She once again noticed Terry's blonde hair and chocolate brown eyes and couldn't help the ache in her chest when she realised that they didn't share these features, that they came from another. There was a separate piece to the jigsaw that was missing too.

But El couldn't deny that Terry Ives was her mother. Not only could she *feel* it, but she saw herself in her mother. She saw her face shape, her lips, her nose. All her mama's.

El felt tears swimming in her eyes as she looked down from her mother's face and noticed her hand lying against her knee. It twitched slightly and within a seconds breath, El had placed her own hand in the palm of her mother's. Her fingers didn't clasp onto El's like Mike's would and the pain of knowing that mama wouldn't respond, not to a smile, not to a look, not to touch threw El's emotions over the edge. They came bursting out of her, the pain of what she had lost erupted.

Cries of grief, of pain and anger came sobbing hysterically out of El as she lay her forehead against hers and Terry's hand. Her whole body shook with rage and sadness as she cried for the mother who had fought so bravely, for the burning anger at what happened to her and the injustice that she had been torn from the life she was meant to have.

El heard hurried voices, she felt the arms of her soul mate wrap around her, holding her from behind, she felt his own shuddering breaths as he experienced her pain with her, never letting go of her as she leaned against her mother and allowed the years of pain and suffering to just leave her body. She allowed all of the poison to be

relieved from her body.

It was only later when El found the strength to sit up and collapse back into Mike's arms properly did she realise that Becky, Hopper, Joyce and Will were all surrounding her. None of them had left, they were all there with her.

"I'm so sorry honey," Becky croaked, wiping her own red eyes. "Your mama s-she *loves* you Jane. She did from the moment she found out she was pregnant. She did *everything* in her power to protect you."

"I know," El gasped, trying to steady her breathing as she clutched onto Mike. He held her close, one hand rubbing circles on her back and the other moving comfortingly through her hair.

Joyce looked anxiously between El, Becky and Terry, her own eyes wet and filled with motherly love. "Why don't I get everyone a drink?" she offered.

Becky sniffled and nodded, "I'll do that," she said while trying to get back to her feet from where they had all been crouched around El and Terry.

"I'll help," Joyce replied, her tone very clear that there was no point in arguing with her. Becky nodded, her emotional exhaustion obvious as she walked slowly out of the room, Joyce right behind her.

Hopper cleared his throat and stood up, giving El a concerned but caring look. "I'll go help your Aunt and Joyce," he said calmly, his voice once again giving El comfort. It was steady and it was strong. It made her feel like he would always be able to protect her. She nodded at him, unable to speak but hoping he knew that she appreciated him.

Will watched the Chief go and looked nervously between Mike and El and the door. "Um...I can go if you want? Give you some privacy?"

"No," El said turning to Will who was surprised by her answer. "Stay," she begged, unable to explain how calming Will's presence was. And in that moment she needed as much support and strength as she could muster.

For a long time El stared up at her mama, trying to take in everything about her while not allowing herself to be pulled back into the deep pit of despair.

"Do you think she knows I'm here?" El eventually croaked out, her voice dry and sore.

"Absolutely," Mike breathed out, his arms tightening around El, wanting nothing more than to protect her from the pain she was experiencing. Will was quite, deep in thought as he stared up at Terry.

"I just wish I could talk to her. I wish...I wish I could tell her thank you."

"Maybe you can," Will whispered breathlessly surprising both El and Mike who turned to look at him. He looked sheepish and unsure but he nervously met the confused amber and hazel eyes, looking between them quickly.

"What if I..." Will bit his lip and looked back up at Terry. "What if I tried to use my powers..."

There was silence in the room for a moment as El exchanged looks with Mike and Will.

It was the Paladin who first spoke, sighing heavily. "Will that amazing to even *think* of doing that but...it's probably too late."

El nodded, her face tight as she tried not to let herself get excited at the small glimmer of hope.

"But I could at least try right?"

El turned to look at Will, his words flickering the spark inside of her. They shared a look and she could see the determination behind his eyes, the way he was willing her to at least let him *attempt* to do this.

"Okay," El whispered breathlessly, nodded her head and trying to stop the quiver in her voice. "Try Will."

Mike looked amazed but quickly swallowed the nerves building in his

throat as he turned to his best friend, nodding too. Urging him on.

Will stumbled to his feet, staring at Terry as he took a deep breath and set his jaw, willing himself to do this. He stepped closer until he was by the side of the chair. He looked hesitant at El, wanting assurance once more.

She nodded, her eyes still wet but sure. "Be careful with her."

"I promise," Will replied immediately. He lifted his hand and was surprised by how steady it was. He had never attempted anything like this before, but something was urging him on. If it was El, if it was Terry, he didn't know. All he knew was that he had to at least *try*. El and Terry deserved it.

His palm gently pressed against Terry's hair, his touch against the crown of her head as he closed his eyes and concentrated.

El and Mike watched on in amazement as Will tensed, his whole strength being used up for this moment. Blood slowly started to appear out of his nose and he shook slightly but continued.

El's eyes flickered to her mama's and she watched her, praying for *something* to happen. Anything that would tell her that her mama was *still* there. That this wasn't just an empty shell.

Hazel eyes stayed locked on the chocolate browns and with a sharp gasp from El she watched as her mother's eyes seemed to clear, the focus within them was starting to build, the light was almost pulsing in them.

El's heart felt like it might burst out of her chest, it pounded with adrenaline and desperation as Terry slowly blinked.

"Mama," El gasped, stumbling into a standing position while Mike uttered in amazement, "Will...it's working!"

El's shaking hands went to carefully cup Terry's face as she once again searched the eyes that were now so much clearer. "Mama, can you hear me? It's Jane. I'm here. I'm *here*."

Will was shaking, blood now running from both nostrils but he didn't

stop, determination etched into his tired face.

It was clear that Terry wasn't *truly* healed, her injuries were complex, but El still couldn't stop the way her heart jumped in surprise when her mama's eyes locked with her own and a stare was shared between them. An understanding, that El was home, that she was *loved* and that Terry's mission was complete. Her baby girl was safe.

El didn't even realise Will had stopped, Mike rushing to him to make sure he was okay. Because in that moment all El could see was her mother. All she could see was a weak but *happy* smile flicker onto Terry's lips and the sound of her voice as she whispered, her voice tired, her voice unused but *relieved* as she looked upon her daughter and said "Jane."

She ignored all of the commotion that entered the room, hugging her mother, crying and repeating, "thank you," again and again to Will who was sat down, Joyce panicking over him while Hopper and Becky asked repeatedly what had happened, Mike explaining everything in amazement.

"I'm fine mom," Will repeated, rolling his eyes and allowing Joyce to wipe at his nose with the damp cloth Becky had quickly handed her.

Hopper and Mike stood back, staring at each other in amazement before they watched El with her mama. Terry wasn't standing, she wasn't talking but she was *present*. There was life behind her eyes again and a small flickering smile on her lips. She *knew* her daughter was there and Mike couldn't stop the way his own throat constricted with emotion. The moment they were sharing was *beautiful*.

The afternoon seemed to be a roller coaster of emotions. The group all sat around the living room while Becky recounted stories of Terry, some stories that brought tears to El's eyes and others that made her life when she realised where she had got certain traits from. It was that thought that made El ask her next question.

"My father. Who is he?"

The room went quiet, all of them having wondered the same thought

but unsure if it was something that Becky had wanted to bring up.

Becky smiled sadly and took a deep breath, "your father was called Andrew. Andrew Rich. He and Terry met in college," she explained to El who listened on with baited breath.

"He and Terry...well, they were very much in love. Not that your mama thought she was going to like him at first!" Becky laughed, shaking her head in amusement as she looked off in the distance, as if reliving every moment of the much happier days.

"You see, Andrew was from a rich family and they paid for college for him. Terry and I were working two jobs each to support ourselves after our parents car crash. She thought that Andrew was going to be spoilt and entitled. But he wasn't *at all*," Becky said fondly, her eyes sad. "He was handsome, he was smart and he stood up for justice."

"What happened to him?" El whispered, already knowing what the answer would be but needing to know more about her father.

Becky sighed heavily, her shoulders drooping slightly as she looked upon El, a frown etched deeply into her brow. "He was drafted to Vietnam and died in the war..."

El felt her heart clench and she tried to stop the new wave of grief that raced through her at the loss of the father she had never known.

Becky shook her head, her palm brushing over her tired forehead. "Terry always said that the lab...that *Brenner* had a hand in Andrew's death. That if it wasn't for him he wouldn't have got drafted. I didn't think it was likely...but now..."

"But now you've seen what the lab is capable of," Hopper sighed heavily looking between a devastated El and Becky. His strong jaw set and he tightened his fists in determination. "The lab is destroyed now Becky. And I promise you. If the lab was involved in drafting Andrew to the war I will find out. We'll get justice for him *and* for Terry."

"Thank you," El spoke up before Becky could even open her mouth to say the same words of gratitude.

Hopper turned to look at El in surprise, both of them sharing a meaningful look. He knew she wasn't just thanking him for wanting justice for her birth parents. It was a thank you for everything. For looking after her even from the shadows. Hopper smiled and nodded his head, "you're welcome kid. You know you're stuck with me for life now right?"

"I know," El grinned, light flickering back into her eyes at her protector.

Becky smiled between them, her attention suddenly distracted as she jumped to her feet and hurried over to a mahogany dresser. She pulled open the draws, rifling for something while the others watched on in curiosity.

"Ah," Becky finally sighed in relief as she pulled out a black photo album, brushing off a bit of dust that had fallen onto the cover. She turned to El, nerves in her gaze as she looked at her niece and handed over the album. "I want you to have this sweetheart."

El frowned, unsure what the book was but handling it with care. She sat on the floor next to mama's chair and by Mike's side. She looked at him, hesitation in her hazel eyes. He smiled and nodded, urging her to open it. His warmth gave her the strength to open the photo album.

She wasn't ready for the photos that captured her gaze. Images of her mama and Becky as children, images of her grandparents, her whole family tree slowly starting to knit together before her eyes.

El was over half way through the album when the photos Becky wanted her to see most came into view. Her breath stuttered as she stared down at the photographs of her parents.

Her mother was *beautiful*, radiating happiness as she kissed El's father on his cheek. His beaming smile was forever captured in the photo.

"You've got his eyes," Mike whispered, a smile in his voice as he looked at the pictures too.

El carefully traced the photos of her parents with her finger, her

touch delicate as she became mesmerized by the images of her parents. "They were so happy," she whispered, her voice wavering.

"They really were," Becky smiled sadly, wiping foolishly at her tears. "They loved each other very much."

"Andrew," came a soft voice, making El startle as she turned to her mama.

The whole room watched Terry with baited breath, willing her to say more. But she merely smiled and went quiet once more.

El sighed, closing the book and getting to her feet, walking over to Becky and engulfing her startled Aunt into a grateful embrace. "Thank you," she whispered.

Becky smiled, sniffing slightly as she held onto El. "You're loved sweetheart. You're so loved."

The sky was indigo by the time Mike and El got back to the Wheeler house. Joyce had been hesitant for them to leave El and wanted to bring her back to the motel, but she had shook her head, saying she wanted to be alone with Mike. And no one, not even Hopper was going to argue with her after the incredibly raw and emotional day she had experienced.

"Let's go through the basement," Mike whispered, his hand holding El's firmly as he led her to the side of the house. "We can chill down here for a bit before you have to face my mom again."

"The basement?" El asked in confusion, expecting a dark and cold area of the house.

"Yeah," Mike said with a smile looking back at El who trailed behind him slightly, allowing him to lead her gently. "I don't know why I didn't show you it either. It's not what you're thinking. It's like...well, it's my favourite part of the house. It's always been my place to chill and I don't know, maybe it can be for you too?"

El didn't argue, nodding and given Mike a tired smile to show that she was happy to do whatever he wanted to. He rifled in his pocket

for his keys and jumped slightly when the door opened of its own accord. He stared at it in confusion before reality hit and he turned back to look at El, laughing softly when she shrugged with a cute smile.

"Come on," he chuckled, leading her in and turning on the light. He let go of her hand to close and lock the door while El took in the space in front of her.

Her lips parted in surprise and her gaze flickered around the large space trying to take everything in. It was *nothing* like the rest of the Wheeler house. Things were out of place, there was mismatched furniture and it was *cosy*. It was inviting and El's idea of heaven.

"What do you think?" Mike asked with almost baited breath, as he looked around the basement that truly made this house a home for him. It was in this space where he had spent the best years of his childhood. Before Will had to move, before they all had to grow up and face the realities of life.

El's eyes were still looking around the space, wanting to imprint everything in her mind. "I love it," she whispered, a sheepish smile appearing on her face. "Can we stay down here tonight?"

"Sure," Mike grinned walking up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. El smiled, closing her eyes and leaning into his touch. He propped his chin on her shoulder and looked around the familiar room, smiling when he spotted something very familiar.

"When Holly used to have nightmares, she would come into my room upset. I used to bring her down here and build her blanket forts. Because nothing can hurt you in a blanket fort right?"

"Right," El grinned, not understanding the logic of that statement but loving the idea. She turned in Mike's arms so that they faced on another. "Can we stay in the blanket fort tonight? I just..." El sighed and closed her eyes, unable to find words for the heavy emotions that swirled around her heart.

"I understand," Mike whispered making El open her eyes in surprise and capture his gaze. And looking in his eyes she knew he was right.

He *did* understand. He *always* understood her. She didn't *need* to explain because Mike would always get it. He would always be there.

El reached up for him, her hand sliding into his messy hair as she stood on her tip toes and Mike leaned down, meeting her lips in a deep kiss that she felt warm her from the inside out. Their mouths moved together, completely in sync not only with their love for one another but with their bodies. They were made for each other, and no one could ever tell El differently.

They were both breathless as they broke their intense kiss, resting their foreheads together and closing their eyes, as they simply breathed each other in. Allowing the scent and feel of their partner to calm their emotionally exhausted bodies.

"How about I sort out the blanket fort, pull the television over and get us some snacks?" Mike whispered, his eyes still closed.

"Eggs?"

Mike laughed, the sound filling El's tired body with warmth. "Would it be anything else?"

El grinned and opened her eyes, leaning up once again to press a grateful kiss to Mike's lips, taking him by surprise as he smiled against her mouth. "I love you," she whispered the sacred words in a breath, letting him take in the feeling.

"I love you too El," he said in response, his words heavy with emotion and gratitude. For a moment they just stared at one another, grinning like the fools in love that they were.

Eventually Mike sighed happily and chuckled, "well I best get my princess's castle ready."

A warm laugh left El's chest as she allowed Mike to pull out of the embrace and followed him over to the table. "I thought it was a blanket fort?" she asked in amusement.

Mike shrugged, smiling the whole time as he adjusted the preexisting fort, extending it and making sure the sheets were clean and tidy. "Blanket fort, castle for my princess, same difference," he teased,

shrugging his shoulders as he walked over to a box, grinning back at El over his shoulder as she playfully smirked at him.

"What are you looking for?" she asked Mike curiously after watching him untangling something still obscured by the box.

Mike tugged at something and then pulled out a ream of fairy lights. He smiled triumphantly and looked back at El pleased with himself. "These."

"Oh," El whispered as her eyes took in the lights. "They remind me of the ones I had in my room at the warehouse..."

Mike frowned, uncertainty flickering in his eyes. "I'm sorry El," he said regretfully searching her eyes with worry. "I didn't think - "

"No, it's fine," El laughed in surprise, shaking her head in amusement and stepping forward, holding her hand out for the lights. "Not every memory I have of my time on the run is bad you know."

"Really?" Mike asked hesitantly, his eyes still wide and concerned that he had upset her.

El shook her head taking the lights over to the fort while Mike stumbled back onto his feet. "Yeah really. I loved my bedroom at the warehouse because it was the first place that I really got to experience what it would be like to just be *me*."

Mike smiled sheepishly and worked with El, building up the fort together. "It looks beautiful," she sighed when he turned on the lights, the flickering sparkle of the fairy lights creating a beautiful warmth, beckoning them both inside. And it wasn't long before El succumbed to its welcome, crawling in and sighing happily when she looked around at the space they had created.

"I'll be right back," Mike grinned. "Got to get my princesses's Eggos."

El laughed, shaking her head in amusement as she watched Mike rush up the stairs. She tucked herself into the blanket before forgetting that they were supposed to have brought the television set over. Poking her head out of the fort to make sure she was definitely alone, El set her gaze on the tv, her eyes narrowing as she levitated

the square box over to her newly built castle, carefully lowering it in front of the table and sighing with accomplishment.

"Wow," Mike laughed when he came down the stairs holding a tray that had a plate of stacked Eggos, two glasses of milk and what looked like a couple of video tapes. "Your powers still amaze me El," he sighed in awe, staring at the television set for a moment. "You're just...wow."

"You sound like Dustin," El teased sarcastically.

"And *you* sound like Max," Mike joked back making them both laugh as he handed El the tray so that he could crawl into the fort to be beside her. "I told mom that you had a headache so you just wanted to chill down here. She was cool with it for once."

"Do you think she likes me?" El asked nervously as she grabbed an Eggo.

"Oh definitely," Mike chuckled, his cheeks warming with colour slightly which didn't go unnoticed by El.

"How do you know?" she asked him suspiciously, already reaching for her next Eggo.

Mike cleared his throat and shrugged before his eyes nervously flickered to El's meeting her gaze. He sighed and let the truth slip out. "She asked when I think we'll get engaged."

El almost choked on her Eggo and giggled at the mortified look on Mike's face.

"It's not *funny*!" he exclaimed, although a laugh broke from his chest a moment later, a large smile widening on his lips.

"So when *are* you going to propose?" El teased, allowing the pain and grief of the day to leave her as she basked in the calming energy of the one she loved the most.

Mike rolled his eyes in amusement and scoffed, "yeah as *if* I'm going to tell you that..."

"You don't know do you?"

"No," Mike laughed. "But I'm going to," he told her with a soft smile while El looked up from her food and into his warm and sparkling amber eyes. "One day I *am* going to propose to you El. Because...because I want everything with you. I can't even *imagine* a world without you now."

El's heart raced and her Eggo lay uneaten as she gave Mike her full attention. Her skin felt like it was tingling at his words and her heart was hitting her ribcage at the thrill of what her love was telling her. She looked at him, truly *looked* at the man who she had saved that night from a mugger. El's gaze danced over the freckles that she adored counting, she looked at the lips she loved to kiss and then onto the hopeful, *beautiful* amber eyes that had started all of this off for her.

"When I met you Mike I was so intrigued by you. I had never met *anyone* like you - "

"What, you hadn't meet a guy laying in the grass being mugged before?"

"Shut up!" El laughed while Mike grinned, his eyes sparkling with happiness as he took her hand in his, his thumb stroking across her soft skin as he waited for her to continue.

"The moment I met you I just *knew* that you were going to be special and even though I wasn't meant to be a part of your world, god I *wanted* to be. I never could have realised that you would *become* my world. Mike I would do anything for you, I love you so much," El's voice wavered but she carried on, smiling despite her watery eyes as she stared at Mike, watching as he stared at her like she was the most precious thing in the whole universe, because to him she *was*. "I want everything with you too. And one day when you do propose. I *promise* I will say yes."

Mike was too choked to speak for a moment and when he finally did talk, his throat was dry and his voice shaky. "I kind of wish I *was* proposing right now," he laughed breathlessly making El grin, her cheeks aching by how wide her smile was. Her eyes sparkled under

the lights and Mike found himself captivated by her beauty all over again.

"Well," El said sensibly. "We can see this as a pre-proposal."

They both laughed, the air light and energetic around them. "How should we celebrate?" Mike teased, wiggling his eyebrow while El laughed. He frowned and shook his head, "shit, I really *do* sound like Dustin."

El giggled, her attention moving back to the Eggos for a moment when she realised what the video tapes were next to the plate. "Where did you get these?" she asked reaching for one of them.

Mike laughed and watched El pick up her favourite movie. "Well that one belongs to Holly, she said we could borrow it. And that one's mine obviously."

"So which one are we going to watch?" El teased, wiggling her own eyebrow in a perfect imitation of Mike, making him laugh and shaking his head in exasperation.

"I doubt I have a choice," he winked playfully, already taking the video out of El's hand and crawling over to the television set with its built in VCR player.

El sighed happily as she leaned back against the pillows and watched on as *The Little Mermaid* began. She looked over at Mike as he stumbled clumsily into the fort, hitting his head on the underside of the table and almost face planting the blankets. El burst out laughing, unable to hold in her love for this clumsy fool. Clearly something things never changed.

"Here, let me help you," El giggled holding her hand out to Mike who groaned and rubbed at the back of his head.

"Why do I always have to act like an idiot in front of you?" he sighed, practically pouting but gratefully took El's waiting hand and let her tug him forward. Mike settled next to her and turned his gaze onto his girlfriend when her hand brushed against his cheek.

El looked deeply into Mike's eyes, the same eyes that had made her

fall in love in the first place and the same eyes she would love and cherish for the rest of her life.

"Because I will *always* be here to help you back up."

Mike's eyes lit up and before El knew it he was kissing her and she smiling against the lips that could melt her into a puddle. The movie ran in the background, her favourite songs playing but not enough to distract her attention from her one true love, because *he* was her world. And she was *his* and together they would be invincible.

Together they would create a world all of their own.

AN: ANYONE ELSE EMOTIONALLY EXHAUSTED OR IS IT JUST ME?!

Wow. I can't believe POYW is over except for a sweet little epilogue. I started this story so long ago when I was in a very dark place in my life and it's crazy to think of how different my life is now.

I have been writing bits and pieces of this chapter for weeks, it's been no small task. But today I really focused and got over 7000 words done and completed the chapter. So I don't usually beg for comments or reviews, but because this is the final chapter and I spent a lot of time and poured a lot of emotion into it, I would love to hear from each and everyone of you who reads it! Pretty please with Eggos on top?!

A massive THANK YOU to everyone who has read this story, commented, left a favourite, a follow or a kudos. Thank you to my cheerleaders who have spurred me on and always had my back. Thank you so much to everyone being so patient while I got these chapters out to you. I experienced so many life changing events during this story so it means a lot to me and I hope it meant something to you too :-)

20. Happily Ever After

Part of Your World

AN: Hi everyone! I hope you're all well :-)) I know it's been ages since I have been able to upload, but I can assure you I have been writing away in my spare time, but unfortunately between working full time and keeping a house clean, 'spare time' is kind of a myth until you go on holiday aka vacation.

I flew to America yesterday to stay with my best friend who I met through the Stranger Things fandom, ready to watch season 3 on Thursday! And all it took was some plane time to get this epilogue finally finished :-))

I hope you enjoy it. And if you need a bit of fluffy Disney Mileven, then this is the chapter for you!

Epilogue - Happily Ever After

March 14th 1994

The wind howled and battered against the large white paned window, a condensation had formed on the glass that had built from the warmth of the bedroom that the window gave a view into.

The room itself was cosy and welcoming. A large bed dominated the space, a hand knitted multi colored comforter was spread over the sheets, almost completely covered by the open suitcase that lay on top. Around the case was piles of clothes, haphazardly thrown onto the bed.

El stood over the suitcase, a small frowning creased on her forehead as she pursed her lips deep in thought.

"Just pack for warm weather," Mike had said excitedly when he told her over a week ago that they were going on a surprise trip with the party on March 15th.

"What do you mean by warm?!" El had practically pleaded, completely

overwhelmed by what type of clothes she was meant to bring.

Mike had smiled gently, that beautiful grin that immediately calmed her racing heart. His fingers had entwined with hers, so easily, so *perfectly* and in that moment she had exhaled a deep breath, allowing her anxiety to leave her.

"Not boiling hot. Dresses, shorts and whatever. But you might want to bring some sweaters or a jacket. Oh and bring your swimsuit...or bikini," he had winked at the last statement, making El playfully roll her eyes at his boyish ways.

El sighed in mild frustration as she grabbed her swimsuit and bikini for good measure and chucked them into the shell of her suitcase. So far there was only a couple of shoes and her toiletries to keep the swimwear company.

She couldn't explain why she was so adamant on packing the right clothes, but something about this vacation seemed *important*. El could only imagine it was because it was the first time the whole party were going away together and it was the first time El would get to go on an aeroplane, Mike had graciously let her know *that* detail at least.

El sighed and admitted defeat, a happy smile flickered across her face as she walked over to her closet and started to pick out some colourful dresses she had bought last summer with Joyce and Max.

She folded them neatly and placed them in her suitcase as her thoughts filled with all of the memories that had taken place over the last two years. There was Mike's graduation from college, El starting her job in the library and doing a creative writing course on the side. She had found she had a passion for happy endings and writing had become a therapy to her, a way to give others the happiness and love that she got to experience on a daily basis.

After everything she had been through she wasn't at all complacent with the hand she had been dealt. El couldn't stop but be grateful for Mike, her family and her friends every single day. She knew what life she *could* have had, and knowing this made her truly thankful for the one she got to live every single day.

El exhaled a laugh, frustrated at herself for feeling anxious in the first place. It shouldn't matter this much about what she packed because at the end of the day it was going to be the vacation itself that would stick out to her. And with that new frame of mind she found the packing process dramatically change to something that filled her body with excitement, her mind flashing with ideas of what kind of surprise Mike could have up his sleeve.

It was as El zipped up her now full suitcase that she noticed the slight itch at the back of her head. It was a familiar feeling, unlike anything else and not something that a scratch of her finger to her scalp could ease. It was a call, a ringing cell phone wanting her attention. El smiled in amusement and lowered herself onto the patchwork comforter, her eyes fluttering closed as she concentrated on her destination. She knew where she was going and who was calling.

She opened her eyes and she was in the abyss of darkness, her bedroom the only glow in the large space. But it didn't scare her anymore. The void had become a place of possibility, a place where she could reach out to her loved ones, check they were safe and calm her anxiety that still crept up from time to time. It was impossible to have gone through everything that El and Kali had dealt with and not have lingering effects. It had become much easier to deal with and El found that she was able to channel that feeling into more productive things, like her writing.

But for now she wasn't filled with any anxiety, because sat next to her on the bed was her sister. Kali smiled, her dark eyes lighting up as she took in El. The girls barely took a moment to grin before they hugged, their arms tightly around one another.

"I missed you," El sighed, clutching onto her sister and breathing in her familiar scent.

"I missed you too," Kali chuckled in amusement knowing that it hadn't been *that* long since their last catch up in the void. With Kali travelling the world with Funshine the void had become the best option to keep up with one another and the new adventures they had both been experiencing.

The girls slowly pulled away enough to smile at each other, El's eyes

sparkled brightly as she looked at her sister. It was always good to see Kali, it was like a piece of her heart had slotted back into place.

"I see you're busy packing," Kali commented, nodding her head towards the suitcase.

"I've just finished actually," El said in a breezy laugh, her gaze going towards the barely contained luggage before looking back at her sister who seemed to avoid her eye. She knew what that look meant and El found an exasperated chuckle leave her lips. "You know where I'm going don't you?"

Kali smirked and shrugged her shoulders, "Mike *may* have called me last week and told me where you were off to..."

"Oh *Kali*!" El whined while her sister continued to display a shit eating grin. "Everyone knows but me!"

"I may not have been in the real world that long, but I'm pretty sure that's what is meant by a *surprise*," Kali teased, arching her dark eyebrow in amusement.

"Yeah, yeah," El mumbled as she shuffled closer to her suitcase. "Can you at least *look* at what I've packed and tell me if you think it's going to be appropriate?"

"Sure," Kali smiled, her dark eyes roaming over the case as El lowered her head, her eyes narrowing slightly as the zip started to move along the colourful material, the noise echoing across the void as the case opened.

El sat in silence and Kali wordlessly rifled through the case, her eyes darting between the clothes as she occasionally smiled or rolled her eyes. It was when she smirked that El finally relented and couldn't stop herself from saying, "what is so funny?!"

"Nothing," Kali mused shaking her head as she refolded a red floral dress. She carefully placed the colourful clothing back in the case and looked back up at El. There was a glint in her eyes, a meaningful depth to the dark gaze.

"It's just...*good* to see you wearing these clothes," Kali finally

admitted, running the palm of her hand across the soft cotton.

"What do you mean?" El asked in curiosity, watching Kali appraising the dresses.

"This is the kind of stuff you should have *always* been wearing. These clothes...they are the side of you that you felt you had to hide away. I'm just *happy* you don't have to do that anymore El."

El's lips parted slightly in surprise as she stared at Kali and took in the meaningful words her sister had spoke. Her hazel eyes moved down to the clothing, taking in the soft cotton, the floral designs, the frills and gentle linen. She remembered the rough dark clothing, the outfits that displayed a character that wasn't her own. And yet despite the exterior showing a person who was dangerous and intimidating, Mike had always seen through that. He had seen the side of her that she now proudly displayed to the world. The person she *was*, the person she was always *meant* to be. And now her sister, her friends and her family got to see that person too.

El couldn't stop the large smile that curved into her dimpled cheeks and the happy sigh that escaped her lips. She reached for Kali's hand which was still laying on top of the red dress. She gently squeezed her sister's hand and their eyes met, both smiles proud and content.

"I know I don't have to hide it anymore and I'm thankful that you accept me for who I really am," El admitted, a side smile lifting her lips.

Kali laughed almost in amazement, "*I'm* happy that you accept *me* for who I really am! I know I can be a handful..."

El grinned and rolled her eyes playfully, "sometimes," she teased making the sisters laugh and bump shoulders.

Kali smiled and looked back at the filled suitcase. "Well I think what you've picked is perfect. And you're going to look even more beautiful than you already are. There's *nothing* more beautiful than being your true self."

El's smile faded into something much softer and she stared at her

sister, their hands still joined. "Thank you Kali," she whispered, feeling choked.

"You're very welcome," Kali grinned, her own happiness and feeling of wholeness evident on her face. Her stresses were gone and just like El, she was getting her own fresh start.

March 15th 1994

"Excuse me," Dustin called loudly, pushing down the small aisle with his large hold all bag. A few passengers looked disgruntled as the adult child moved past, a flurry of excitement as he found his seat, not realising the amount of people he would knock against the head with his swinging bag.

"Dustin," Max hissed from where she stood behind him in the aisle. "*Be careful.* You're going to get us all thrown off this plane before it's even taken off!"

Dustin grinned as he stopped in front of the four seats at the centre of the plane. His eyes flickered over the numbers before turning to his annoyed red head friend. "Oh come on, people need to lighten up! We're going on our vacation!" Dustin cheered, his beaming smile in full force.

He moved his gaze onto Mike and El who were stood at the end of the aisle, behind Will and Lucas. Dustin smirked and turned back to Max, a knowing look in his eyes. "Besides, how can I not be happy when we know - "

Max gave Dustin a narrowed glare, a look that told him to shut up now before he gave anything away. He sighed, rolling his eyes in amusement before throwing his bag into the overhead locker.

Max shook her head and exhaled a deep breath before glancing over her shoulder to look at Lucas. "Do I really need to be the one to sit next to this fool?"

"You lost the bet Mayfield," Dustin called from where he was shuffling down to the end of the four seat section.

Lucas sniggered and gently urged his girlfriend forward. "I'll be right next to you," he said with a grin, leaning forward to kiss the back of Max's head as he shuffled her closer to the seating. The red head huffed and muttered death threats to Dustin under her breath, but gave in, moving down to sit by her annoying friend while Lucas took the next seat and Will the one after him.

Mike held El's hand, leading her down the aisle to the two seats next to the rest of the party's section. His other hand was straining with the weight of his own bag and El's luggage which he had insisted on carrying. His moment of chivalry was not as convincing when the muscles twitched in his arm, desperately counting down the seconds until they would be relieved of the load.

He turned to look at El, watching her as she glanced around the cabin, taking in the design, the packed feeling of passengers and the excitement that seemed to buzz as people got ready for the flight to California.

"Are you okay?" he asked her over the sound of the plane as it started to get prepared to leave the gate.

El's hazel eyes turned immediately to Mike, capturing his gaze and making his heart race. A smile lit up her face and she nodded, her excitement over the surprise trip starting to flicker into her eyes.

As they reached their seats Mike lifted their baggage into the overhead locker, his palms warming slightly as he carefully adjusted his own bag, making sure it was secure. His eyes lingered on a section of the bag and he took a shaky breath, suddenly feeling nervous.

"Are *you* okay?" El asked suddenly, her voice making Mike jump as he was brought out of his internal anxiety. He turned to find his girlfriend stood next to him, her eyes a picture of worry as she looked him over, noticing the nerves that had etched onto his face.

"Y-Yeah!" Mike blurted out, wanting to kick himself because it was obvious that his act wasn't entirely convincing. He hesitantly closed the overhead locker and turned back to El, "I just want everything to go perfectly." His words weren't a lie after all, Mike just hoped she

didn't know to what extent he wanted things to go perfectly. That months and months of planning and saving had built up to this trip.

El smiled, her eyes sparkling as she reached for Mike's hand, their fingers entwining immediately. "I don't know what you've got planned, but I *know* whatever it is, it's going to be perfect."

Mike beamed, he couldn't help the way his grin curved into his cheeks with pride and a wholeness of love that El built up within him everyday. He pulled her closer by their laced fingers, forgetting his surroundings as he closed his eyes and kissed her. Mike smiled against El's lips, feeling her own lift as for a moment they melted into one another's touch and feel. His hands moved to her cheeks, his thumbs caressing the softness of her skin while El's hands clutched to his arms, keeping him close.

It wasn't until there were some throats being cleared and a lot of wolf whistling on Dustin's part that made Mike and El realise they were stood in the middle of a plane. They pulled away enough to look around at the passengers, most of them staring back at the young couple either with amused smiles or exasperation.

Mike felt a laugh leave his throat at the situation and El giggled, colour filling her cheeks, making them a tinged pink as she quickly moved to their seats, taking the one next to the window and trying to control her smile at the situation. Mike joined her, buckling himself in and then showing El how to work the seatbelt.

They held hands over the armrest and as the plane started to slowly move away from the gate and the cabin crew began their safety talk, Mike felt El's hand start to clam up as her grip on his fingers tightened.

Mike turned to look at El, watching the way her eyes had widened with fear as she glanced between the moving scenery and the air hostess who was demonstrating the life jacket. Mike waited for the talk to finish before he spoke, his thumb gently caressing over El's slightly sweaty hand.

"Hey," he whispered gently as El blinked and turned to look at him, her expression was startled, almost like a deer caught in the

headlights. "It's going to be okay. All the noises, that's just preparing us for take off. And I'm going to talk you through the whole thing, okay?"

El gulped, nerves still at the edge of her eyes, but she nodded, keeping her gaze on Mike as the aeroplane went through its processes and he explained what was happening. A moment later the captain's cheerful voice came through the speakers as he introduced himself and the first officer and explained that the flight to California would take four hours and twenty minutes.

It was in that moment that El's worry seemed to dissipate as it made room for a wide and beautiful smile. She turned to Mike who realised that keeping El in the dark about their location, even going to the extent of her not looking at her ticket, was now up.

"We're going to California?" she asked in an excited whisper. Her gaze flickered between Mike's eyes, waiting for him to confirm what the captain had already said.

Mike couldn't hide his own smile, the adrenaline of the vacation and what it would mean to them, to *her* finally erupting inside of him. "Yes," he breathed out, his voice and whole body feeling exhilarated. "We're going to California."

El's eyes widened with happiness and she leaned in, kissing Mike's lips eagerly while he smiled at her touch, his hand coming up to cup her cheek as they enjoyed the moment. It was when the plane stopped and the sounds of the engines began to roar and rumble ready for take off that Mike pulled back with a grin, explaining to El what was happening as he handed her some candy, hoping it would stop the pressure making her ears hurt.

He held her hand tightly, taking a moment to look to his right where Will, Lucas, Max and Dustin were sat. They caught his eye, giving him a wink and a thumbs up before he turned his attention back onto El. She clutched onto his hand as the plane started to take off, the adrenaline hitting them both as they looked out the window and watched the plane rush past the O'Hare International Airport before they were suddenly going up.

El gasped as she watched the scenery, her eyes completely fixated on a view unlike anything she had ever seen before. Her eyes widened and her lips parted in awe as the plane passed through the fluffy clouds.

Mike watched El the whole time, his heart warming as he gazed at her taking in this moment for the very first time. He knew she loved it from the way her lips twitched into a smile as she watched the clouds, a blanket of white that looked almost inviting. The horizon was beautiful, a light blue that contrasted to the cloudy skies of Chicago.

They were above it all now, El's excited smile, Mike's nervous but strong pounding heart and the knowing smirks of the rest of the party as they watched the couple. It was a life changing experience for El and it was about to become a life changing trip.

The excitement in the party only seemed to build after they had safely landed in California. The bickering between Dustin and Max subsided as the group went through security and collected their luggage.

El didn't notice the glances that her friends were giving each other, she was too preoccupied with the hustle and bustle of the airport, and the feeling of achievement that filled her when her passport was inspected and no alarms were raised.

She was just as normal as any of her friends and she couldn't help the smile of pride that lifted her lips in that moment. This new life wasn't just some novelty that would wear off. No, this was *her* life now. New opportunities, endless possibilities and happy memories were something that El didn't have to dream about anymore, she could *live* them.

"Are you ready?" Mike asked El, bringing her out of the reverie that had captured her in the moment. She blinked and looked at her boyfriend. He stood next to a large taxi, their friends already clambering in.

Her hazel eyes took him in, really looked at the boy, the *man* who

had saved her and she immediately felt her eyes light up and her heart beat faster with every second that past. El exhaled, a happy sigh escaping her lips as she nodded at her love, taking his waiting hand.

"I'm ready."

El didn't know *where* to look as the taxi began its journey and they made their way through Anaheim. The rush of downtown traffic was a sharp contrast to the palm trees moving slightly in the breeze, calm unlike the people that surrounded them.

"Shouldn't we blindfold El or something?" Dustin whispered, but not too quietly that his words didn't reach El's ears.

She turned to look at him in confusion, her brow lowering slightly as her gaze flickered between her friends and Mike.

"Why would we do that?" her boyfriend asked in a slightly annoyed tone.

Dustin laughed, "well it's going to be pretty obvious soon enough where we are going if El doesn't stop looking out the window," his words were only to tease as he nudged his telekinetic's friends leg and made her grin, her eyes rolling slightly in amusement.

"He's got a point," Max admitted while Dustin gaped at her in astonishment that she agreed with him for once. He got a nudge in the ribs as a response from the fiery redhead.

"Fine," El giggled, excitement overflowing in her body to the point where she felt almost shaky. "No need to blindfold me, I'll close my eyes."

A warm hand encompassed her own, and El looked up to find Mike's soft amber eyes on her. "You don't need to close your eyes if you don't want to," he assured her, his gaze so tender that it caused a stir of butterflies to flutter madly in her stomach.

El exhaled a breathy sigh and smiled gently at Mike, "it's fine," she said with a calm certainty, snuggling closer to him as much as her seatbelt would allow. She felt his strong and reassuring hold around

her immediately, and she tucked her head into his chest and closed her eyes, quite happy and comfortable. If it wasn't for the buzzing excitement, El was positive she could have easily fallen asleep just like this, in Mike's arms.

For the next ten minutes or so there was suggestive coughs and sniggers from the group, clearly seeing something that was indicating the surprise that El was in store for. Sometimes she was able to remain silent, but when the noise of snickering got too loudly, she couldn't help but huff and warn the group that she would open her eyes early if they didn't stop. Everyone managed to contain their eagerness for the next five minutes before there was a bit of movement and Mike finally cleared his throat.

"Okay El," came his soft whisper, the excitement so evident in his voice no matter how much he tried to contain it. "Open your eyes."

El blinked rapidly trying to adjust to the light of the taxi as her boyfriend and friends watched her, all of them practically on the brink of exploding with anticipation. Her hazel eyes moved to the window, noticing the road there were now on looked brighter and cleaner and vibrant. There was perfectly trimmed green bushes next to vibrant red flowers, making everything looked like it was extremely well kept.

El scooted forward slightly in her chair and looked through the windscreen, it took only a moment before her eyes captured the sign that she immediately knew her friends and boyfriend had been eager for her to find.

Disneyland Resort

A gasp escaped El's throat and her eyes widened in shock, her breath practically taken from her as she looked between the sign and Mike, hoping, *praying* this wasn't a joke.

"It's real El" he assured her, his smile so beautifully soft as he looked at her, her happiness was *his* happiness.

A tear fell gracefully down El's cheek, followed by another, and another. She went to foolishly wipe at her face but Mike's gentle hand

came up quicker, he cupped her face and slowly wiped her tears with his thumb. Their eyes connected, his warm, hers tender.

"Are you happy?" he whispered.

El tried to swallow the lump in her throat and nodded into his hand, her eyes becoming brighter and her smile widening as she realised the reality of his words and where he had taken her. They called it the happiest place on earth, but to El it was so much more than that. It represented the part of herself that had always stayed innocent despite the atrocities she had seen. It meant more to her than she could explain, and the fact that Mike knew this too and had brought her here, well...it was indescribable how much she loved him, and so evident how much he loved her.

"Yes," El gasped, leaning in and kissing Mike, taking him slightly by surprise as he laughed against her lips, before deepening the kiss. His hand moved into her curly hair while their friends all made loud and obnoxious vomiting sounds, but for the moment they ignored them and escaped into their own little world. Of course this didn't last long before El, impatient and too overwhelmed to function had to look back at the spectacle that was the approaching Disneyland Resort.

"Are you excited El?" Will asked grinning, all of the party watching their friend with eagerness, none of them admitting how emotional they felt by her reaction to the surprise, only Max subtly wiping at her tears with the edge of her sleeve.

El took her eyes off the Disneyland entrance for a moment to beam at her friends, each one of them smiling back at her. "This is the best day of my life," she exhaled in a happy burst.

Lucas and Dustin laughed, Will and Max grinned, the red head's eyes now a watery blue while Mike sighed with contentment and squeezed El's hand, grabbing her attention once more. "Mine too," he admitted.

Mike was able to run from his nervousness for the next few hours, it was an accumulation of checking in, finding the hotel rooms, arguing with Max and Dustin about who got the better of the three rooms and finally coming out victorious when he reminded them in a harsh

whisper *who* had arranged this trip and the reason behind it.

No matter how anxious Mike felt inside, his stomach a series of knots he didn't think would ever untangle; he also couldn't stop the gidding happiness that flowed through his veins when he looked at El. She was too excited to unpack, and resembled a ball of energy rather than a person as she raced around the room, cooing at anything Disney related and gasping now and again when she would catch sight of a new view from the balcony. Mike didn't think he had ever seen her this happy, and he hoped against everything that he held dear that he wouldn't mess this up for her. It *had* to be perfect.

"Hey, are you ready to get going?" Lucas called from the corridor, his voice loud enough to tell Mike that he was only on the other side of the door.

"El, are you ready?" Mike called to his girlfriend who was still admiring the view of Disneyland from the balcony.

"One minute," she called back in a happy sigh, her voice distracted as she watched the castle in utter astonishment.

Mike watched her for a moment, a large grin on his face before he forced himself to walk to the door of the hotel room, opening it to see Lucas, Max, Will and Dustin lingering in the corridor. "El's almost ready," he told them, smiling slightly as he turned his head back to look at her one more time.

"Are *you* ready Wheeler?" Max asked, a teasing grin on her face.

Mike gulped, turning away from El to nod, patting his pocket where something very special was securely zipped in. "Yeah," he exhaled in a nervous but almost steady voice as he looked at the party who grinned at him expectantly.

Dustin clapped his hands together, a gleeful expression on his face as Mike realised his best friend had changed into a Disney shirt and was practically bouncing with excitement. "Well, let's go then!"

Mike laughed and heard the eager footsteps of El, she was by his side within seconds, the largest and most beautiful smile on her face as

she laced her fingers with Mike's and became just as giddy as Dustin, if not more so.

Mike grinned at El, his heart softening just as quickly as his gaze. He loved her, more than he could ever put into words. More than he could ever put into *actions*. She was his everything and he knew that he would work every single day to make sure she was happy and healthy. That she was always smiling and always laughing. She didn't deserve anything but happiness and he hoped that he could make her feel that way for the rest of their lives.

"Let's go and make your dreams come true," Mike said tenderly, his gaze only for El as her hazel eyes lit up and his heart squeezed with happiness. *And mine*, he couldn't help but think to himself. Today was the day, it had never felt more perfect and Mike had never felt so ready.

The television commercials did Disneyland no justice El thought to herself as she wandered the resort with Mike and the party. Her head was turned multiple times by characters, the cute and colourful buildings and the music that filled the clean streets with Disney melodies.

El couldn't take her eyes off the castle in the background, her eyes widening with awe every time she looked at its beauty.

"Are you okay El?" Max asked, a smirk on her face but a light in her blue eyes that told El her best friend was just as happy to be here as she was.

"It just doesn't seem real," she sighed in amazement, looking at the perfectly trimmed Mickey style bushes.

"It's definitely real," Lucas added, making El and Max turn their heads to see the boys returning to the bench they had acquired, their hands laden with ice cream. "If it wasn't real, that ice cream wouldn't have been so damn expensive."

"Oh don't whine," Max teased, grabbing for her ice cream treat.

Lucas raised his eyebrow at her. "I didn't see *you* buying the ice cream."

"Or the drinks," Dustin butted in, chucking a can to Max who caught it impressively with one hand.

"Yeah, what's your contribution been Max?" Mike asked playfully as he handed El her Mickey Mouse shaped ice cream cone and kissed her cheek, causing a giddy smile to stretch her pink lips.

"My contribution is being here," Max responded with a short laugh, as if she couldn't believe that her friends could even doubt this fact. "You know this trip wouldn't be the same without me."

"You could say that again," Mike muttered, a cheeky glint in his eyes before Max gave him a quick kick to the shin and swiftly started to run, giggling as Mike tried to catch up to her. The rest of the party laughed, El grinning as she watched her boyfriend and her best friend, her heart happy and light as she allowed herself to jump head first into the fun that Disney could offer them.

The day seemed to go by in a spin of laughter, smiles so wide that everyone was complaining of aching cheeks and a bundle of enthusiastic conversations to be had after each ride.

Lucas and Max's favorite without a doubt was the Matterhorn, they queued up multiple times to go on the fast ride, adrenaline rushing through their veins as they practically jumped back into the bobsleds.

Dustin and Mike seemed to favour the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad ride which was a runaway train. El clung onto the bar with one hand and Mike with the other, even she couldn't stop smiling and laughing every time one of the party would scream, usually Dustin.

El wasn't as impressed with the Haunted Mansion. She could tell it was popular, but could only assume she had seen too many real life horrors in her life to be scared of talking and singing statues.

The next ride Splash Mountain turned out to be El's favourite. She loved the anticipation of the drop and the moment when they would hit the water and wait for that wave to engulf them. The first log

consisted of El, Mike and Will, and they all got as drenched as each other, laughing and wiping water out of their eyes as they got off the ride and stepped to the side to see Dustin, Lucas and Max make their own descent into the water. Dustin tried to avoid the water by hiding behind Max but it was no use, and he came off the ride ringing out his shirt.

But with the Californian sun beating down on them, all it took was an hour lunch break sat outside for the heat to radiate through their clothes.

"Damn I miss California," Max sighed as she closed her eyes and lifted her head, allowing the rays of the sun to wash over her face.

"Much better weather than Chicago," Will agreed, looking around at the views through his sunglasses.

"Why didn't you bring Daniel?" El asked curiously. Daniel was Will's boyfriend. It hadn't taken long after the events of 1992 for Will to come out to his friends and family. And while the rest of the world may have had a problem with his sexuality, his friends and family certainly didn't. They accepted Will for who he was, nothing more and nothing less. Love was love.

"He couldn't get off work," Will admitted with a sad smile. "But it's okay, he's taking me to Vancouver in three weeks for his sister's wedding."

"Look at you Will, you high flyer," Max teased, a happy grin on her face as she looked at her friend.

"I know," he laughed shaking his head in amusement. Will sighed and looked around at his friends. They were all gathered around a picnic bench and watching him avidly, knowing there was more he wanted to say.

"I just can't believe all those years I was basically shut inside. And now...now I can *live*. I got to start going to art college, and I met Daniel and now I'm getting to travel. It's just...life is *great* right now and I'm thankful." He admitted, lifting his sunglasses to turn his kind brown eyes onto El who had become a sister to him, *literally*

considering El's adoptive father Hopper and Joyce had become an official couple over two years ago.

El couldn't help but smile back at her brother, her eyes sparkling with emotion as she reached for Will's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. What she didn't know was that Mike was watching her, his voice too choked to speak as he gazed at the girl that had made all of this possible. The girl who was free too. Who would get to live a life she truly deserved.

After an afternoon of visiting Mickey's Toon Town which consisted of Roger Rabbit's Car Toon Spin, a ride that reminded El of the New York taxi cabs they had seen when visiting Jonathan and Nancy, and a hoard of photos, mostly taken by Will of the group, they enjoyed the Lion King Celebration Parade.

El couldn't stop the giddy excitement she felt listening to the music of her second favourite Disney movie and watching the parade come to live as it moved down the street. She had watched the iconic movie with Holly, neither of them realising at the time that they would be fast forwarding through Mufasa's death any other time they watched The Lion King because as Holly wisely put it "it was too upsetting for their hearts."

A smile didn't leave El's face through the entire parade, her hand entwined with Mike's as she jumped up and down to see the spectacle in front of them. In the end Mike gave up and insisted on giving El a piggy back so she could see better. Even though he was relentlessly teased for being weak by the rest of the party, he kept his cool, even if his bones felt like they might crumble. He wasn't going to spoil one moment of this day for El. His muscles screaming was totally worth it, especially when El leaned down and pressed a kiss to his ear, whispering, "thank you", a caress that sent goose bumps dancing down his neck and straight to his heart.

"Are you ready El?" Mike asked as he buttoned up his white shirt. She was in the bathroom getting ready for the fireworks with Max, having no idea of what this evening would truly entail.

"Five minutes," she called back in a sing song voice which made Mike

laugh softly.

He walked over to the full length mirror attached to the wall in the bedroom and looked at himself, noticing the slight nerves creeping in his eyes. It gave him an almost maddening look and Mike quickly blinked, trying to clear the insanity that he felt.

There was a quiet knock at the hotel room and Mike shook his head, hoping that would clear his anxiety as he walked over to the door and opened it. Stood in the corridor was Will, Lucas and Dustin.

"You ready?" Will whispered, his eyes calm and supportive, all of the boys knowing he wasn't referring to Mike's change of clothes.

"Yeah," Mike answered in a shuddering breath as he tapped his pocket.

"I don't know why you look so worried," Dustin grinned. "You *know* she is going to say yes."

Mike sighed and ran a shaky hand through his hair. "I'm *hoping* she will say yes. But I want this to be perfect okay?"

"I get it," Lucas added with a slight grin as he reached out and clapped Mike on the shoulder. "But dude I promise you, today has already been perfect for her. This is just the cherry on top of the cake."

Mike nodded and exhaled his nervous breath, "thanks guys". A small smile curved on his lips as he looked at his best friends. They had always been there, and they would be by his side when he asked the most important question of his life.

Mike was brought out of the moment when he heard the slight squeak of the bathroom door as it opened. He nervously cleared his throat and turned around, not ready for the vision that was waiting for him.

El looked more beautiful than ever and Mike's heart felt like it momentarily stopped. She was in a yellow summer dress that was cut off the shoulders and trimmed off with white lace frills. Her hair was flowing gently down, the edge of her curls caressing softly against her

bare shoulders. She didn't have on too much makeup, she didn't need it after all, and her natural beauty shone through as her radiant smile made the whole room a lot brighter.

Mike was speechless, he tried and failed miserably at clearing his sudden dry throat. El would never know how beautiful she really was. She would never *truly* understand how the light in her eyes could light the whole world, that her soft laughter could cause so much happiness or that she was the only girl in the whole universe that Mike would ever feel this way about. The only one he would ever love. She was the love of his life.

And then there came another voice and Mike realised that they weren't alone, it wasn't just him and El against the world. In fact there was a distinctive female voice sighing, "are you just going to stand there with your mouth open Wheeler or are you going to tell El how beautiful she looks?"

This was coupled with "someone pick Mike's tongue off the carpet," from a sniggering Lucas.

"El..." Mike croaked out, his eyes wide as he stared at his love. "You are so beautiful."

A pretty pink blush coloured El's cheeks, coupled with a bashful smile that only made Mike fall deeper in love with her. She took a steady breath, the sparkle never leaving her eyes as she stepped closer to Mike, her fingers moving to his shoulders, before her arms encircled the back of his neck and she pulled him down for a gentle kiss.

Mike closed his eyes and smiled into the kiss, the serenity of the touch of their lips, so delicate and calming was such a sharp contrast to the ecstatic pounding of his heart.

For once, their friends decided not to make puking noises, too preoccupied with smirking at one another and trying to hide their knowing smiles.

El finally pulled away from Mike with a soft chuckle as her thumb gently brushed against his lips, removing the gloss she had just left there. "It suited you," she teased making Mike grin so wide his cheeks

instantly ached.

"Well I doubt it will be the last time tonight that I get that stuff on me," he laughed, reaching for El's hand and watching as their fingers immediately entwined, their hands fitting as perfectly as two pieces of a puzzle.

"10 bucks says that El loses her lip gloss before we even get to the castle," Max smirked as she reached Lucas, taking his hand and smiling contently when he kissed her cheek. Their eyes met and they shared a playful glint in their eyes.

"No I reckon by the time we get out of the hotel, her lip gloss will be off." Will said playfully, laughing when Mike and El both rolled their eyes in unison.

"Yeah okay, I'll take that bet." Max nodded, her eyes flickering between Mike and El in a 'I'm watching you' fashion.

"You guys are so wrong," El goaded in a sing song voice, before pulling Mike by his hand to bring him closer. She looked up at him, a mischievous look in her eyes that her boyfriend knew immediately. He grinned as his hands moved to her hips and he bent his head down, meeting her lips in a passionate kiss that had the party complaining.

When El eventually pulled away, breathless and practically humming with happiness, she playfully smiled at her friends, her lips now clear of lipgloss.

"Wow...you really *don't* mess with Mileven," Dustin said in slight awe as he grinned at his friends.

"Mileven?" Mike and El asked together, curiosity and amusement evident in their faces.

"Yeah Mileven," Dustin responded with a slight chuckle as they all started to move down the corridor. "You take Mike, you take Eleven and you get - "

"Mileven," Max cut in finishing Dustin's speech. She grinned, "I like it."

"Come on Mileven!" Will called, a smile on his face as he looked back at the bemused couple. "We've got some fireworks to get to!"

Mike felt his stomach jump nervously, but when he looked down at El and saw the obvious excitement in her beautiful hazel eyes, he took a steady breath. He could do this.

"How did we get such a good spot?!" El called over the loud crowd as the party gathered by the bridge and looked up at the castle which was directly in front of them.

Mike shrugged, a glint in his eyes. "We may have pulled off a bit of magic of our own..."

El beamed at her boyfriend and nuzzled into his side, her arm around his narrow waist while his arm wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her even closer. He pressed a kiss to her temple and let out a shaky breath.

"Are you okay?" El asked, lifting her head slightly to look up at her boyfriend. Her eyes narrowed slightly as for the first time she noticed that he looked anxious.

"Y-Yeah! Yeah I'm fine, just um...excited for the fireworks," Mike stumbled out, El immediately becoming suspicious of her boyfriend's behaviour. She had always been good at knowing when someone wasn't being honest, and with having such a deeper connection with Mike El could read him like a book.

She opened her mouth to question him when the lamps dimmed down and spotlights appeared on the castle. El along with the rest of the large crowd were immediately distracted. Her suspicion over Mike's behaviour went momentarily to the back of her mind as she focused on the castle. There was a hum of excited energy in the crowd and El fell right into the wave of anticipation.

The Californian warm night was suddenly filled with the sound of Disney music as it boomed through the speakers in the same moment that the castle was lit up once more. El's mouth gaped open in awe as she took in the sight.

It was a melody of Disney music, the castle changing colours and the fireworks blasting all within a synchronised routine. El's eyes felt wet as she listened to *Part of Your World* and watched the fireworks sparkling glittery gold, turquoise and purple. They glistened in the air as El's whole expression was captivated by the beauty in front of her. She didn't think she would ever forget this moment.

She was completely lost in the moment, barely blinking as the music changed to *Can You Feel The Love Tonight* and wheels of red fireworks moved so delicately to the music it was as if they were dancing.

Song after song, sparkle after sparkle, El watched on, tuning out the "oohs" and "ahhh" of the crowd. She had always known that seeing the firework show was going to be an experience, but she had never accounted for the emotion that she now felt. Her heart felt warm, her stomach light and her chest heavy as she suppressed the urge to sob. She was really here. She had survived the horrors, she didn't have to hide herself from the world any more. Doors that had always been closed to El were now open. She truly understood the meaning of *freedom* and as the tears began to fall, she let them. For they were the evidence of what she had been through, they were the proof that she was a survivor.

The last of the fireworks were spinning, blasting and sparkling into the air when El felt Mike gently tug her hand. She turned to look at him and immediately froze in surprise.

The party were no longer by their side, in fact they were stood back along with some of the crowd who were watching El and Mike with just as much excitement as her friends. Will was clutching onto a camera while Max was beaming, holding onto Lucas and Dustin as if trying to contain herself.

But El only had eyes for Mike. The love of her life, her soulmate and her saviour, the man who was now bent on one knee, looking up at her like she held his entire life's happiness in her hands.

"Mike?" El whispered, barely audible over the fireworks. Those bright lights were now shining over Mike and the small box that he held in his shaky hand.

"El," he croaked out, the colours of the fireworks flashing over his pale skin. "I love you," he managed to say before his voice wavered. He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head, taking a deep breath and trying again.

"El you don't know how happy you make me. You are my best..." he choked again, his dark eyes watery, but not nearly as wet as El's. Tears ran down her cheeks but all she could do was smile in disbelief as she watched her love, adrenaline surging through her veins.

"You are my best friend, my soulmate. My world became a much brighter and happier place the moment I met you. I love you with my whole heart and soul and I never want to be without you, ever." Mike gulped and with fumbling fingers managed to open the jewellery box.

El couldn't help but gasp in excitement and utter astonishment that this moment was happening. Her wide hazel eyes left Mike's for a moment to look at the sparkly ring. It was gold with a beautiful princess cut diamond in the centre and two smaller diamonds either side. It sparkled in the light of the fireworks and El swooned at the beauty Mike had chosen for her.

"Oh Mike," El responded in a sob, her heart racing as her gaze went immediately back to the beautiful dark amber eyes that she loved so deeply.

Mike exhaled a steady breath and a nervous smile lifted his lips. "El, will you be my wife? Will you marry me?"

El nodded repeatedly. her whole body trembling as she smiled, cried and laughed joyfully in a complex mix of emotions.

"Yes...yes!"

Mike's whole body seemed to deflate of all anxiety and nerves and the most beautiful smile El had ever seen immediately appeared on his face. He stumbled to his feet and engulfed El in an embrace.

The crowd cheered and clapped, Max whistling madly as a camera clicked away and Dustin and Lucas whooped loudly.

In the heat of the moment and the utter euphoria they both felt, Mike

lifted El off her feet, kissing her lips in a blissful ecstatic moment. El grinned against Mike's mouth, her arms tightly around his neck and her legs dangling off the floor as Mike lifted her higher. It was difficult to say whose tears belonged to whom or which heart was beating louder.

"I love you," El gasped between kisses, sobs still leaving her throat. "I love you so much Mike!"

"I love you El," Mike responded, his arms wrapping around his fiancée even more firmly, never wanting to let go.

"El you haven't even put your ring on yet!" Max called to them, making Mike snort and El laugh.

They pulled back slowly, Mike carefully placing El back down and reaching for the box still in his grasp. He took the ring out and El held out her hand, grinning at how her hand couldn't help but tremble with the thought of such a beautiful ring being on her finger.

Mike carefully pushed the ring down her ring finger, exhaling a relieved breath that it fitted so perfectly.

"Mike it's beautiful," El cooed as she lifted her hand and watched the ring sparkle.

"There isn't a ring out there as beautiful as you El." Mike said softly, reaching for his fiancée's hands. Their fingers entwined and they leaned in, their foreheads resting together as they stared into each other's eyes, the sparkle of happiness flickering between them like electricity.

"Thank you," El gasped, trying to swallow the lump in her throat as fresh tears gathered on her lower lashes. "This was perfect. The whole day was perfect, every single day is *perfect* with you Mike."

A hopeful and loving smile appeared on Mike's face as he looked at the love of his life. "And I intend for the rest of our lives to be perfect El. I love you."

El beamed, she could practically feel light shining out of her with how incredibly happy she felt. It was a feeling that had not existed

before Mike, but she knew it was a feeling that he would guarantee she would feel every day.

She moved her fingers to Mike's cheeks, her thumbs delicately brushing away the tear marks as she leaned up and kissed her fiancé, soon to be husband. "And I love you," she whispered back in a soft caress. El closed her eyes and sighed in contentment, completely wrapped up in the world her and Mike had created.

Max, Lucas, Dustin and Will watched on, smiles on all their faces and love in their eyes.

Will grinned and looked at his best friend and his sister, knowing there was only one thing to say.

"And they lived happily ever after."

AN: Part of Your World is officially over! And I won't lie, I felt very close to tears on the plane when I finally finished it. All of my stories mean the world to me on a personal level, and this one wasn't just representing El's freedom from a bad situation, but mine too.

Thank you for reading, I really do appreciate every single one of you
x